Jenna Lyons Defines Leadership

The concept of leadership has been studied and theorized for decades with seemingly very little to show for it. As a result of all of this research, leadership has been defined in a number of varying ways. The textbook provides us with a general and watered down yet acceptable definition of "the ability to influence people toward the attainment of goals" (D&M 440). Just about any schmuck can fit his role or style of leadership into this definition, therefore I would like to present a definition of *effective* leadership as the process of empowering and enabling subordinates, through understanding, vision, and development, to accomplish common goals. Effective leaders have a number of avenues to take to be successful. A study of the transformational leader, Jenna Lyons of J.Crew, provides us with an excellent example of effective authentic leadership style.

A transformational leader can inspire and motivate people to go above and beyond their assigned duties and have the ability to "bring about innovation and change by recognizing followers' needs and concerns, providing meaning, challenging people to look at old problems in new ways, and acting as role models for the new values and behaviors" (D&M 460). Lyons excels at recognizing her followers' needs and concerns. Lyons recognizes and investigates into the problems of her stylists by acting like "a glorified crossing guard.. [keeping] people motivated, [keeping] the traffic moving, [keeping] people from getting stumped or stopped by a problem" (Sacks 2). This level of perception and attention to detail is certainly not a characteristic of mediocre leadership. Lyons shows a great amount of compassion for subordinates as well by making people feel appreciated, even when it comes to delivering criticisms and challenges. Lyons also presents herself as a role model for the positive changes she wants to promote in the company: innovation and boldness. She leads by example through dressing in radical outfits which are usually outside of the scope of current fashion. This encourages her employees to be innovative and not be fearful to try new approaches and experimentation.

An authentic leader "inspires trust and commitment because they respect diverse viewpoints, encourage collaboration, and help others learn, grow, and develop as leaders" (D&M 444). In addition to these qualities, authentic leaders possess the following key characteristics: pursuing their purpose with passion, practicing solid values, leading with their hearts as well as their heads, pursuing the establishment of connected relationships, and demonstrating self-discipline (D&M 445). Lyons pursues her purpose with deep passion which she discovered from her childhood. She wanted to enable all people to feel like they could take part in something beautiful because of the hardships she endured as an 'ugly duckling.' Lyons demonstrates her practice of solid values through her initial contact with J.Crew's new CEO, Millard Drexler. Knowing that her job was on the line, she remained dangerously honest when asked for her opinion on the J.Crew product line. Lyons leads with her heart as well as her head as is evident when dealing with her subordinates. She realizes that when stylists bring experiments and new ideas forward, they are really bringing a part of themselves. Instead of simply dismissing unattractive ideas, she encourages them in a positive way and works with them to fix problems together. This quality reveals her compassion and her commitment to forming trusting and connected relationships. Her self-discipline is demonstrated by her humility and her loyalty to J.Crew even though she has developed herself to icon status and could very well start her own successful line.

I believe that Jenna Lyons is a wonderful example of a transformational leader who employs effective authentic leadership. She has used her leadership skills to successfully promote vision and change and turned J.Crew into a successful and influential fashion force. To work under such a compassionate, humble, and enabling leader where one can feel free to try new things and make mistakes would be a true blessing.