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Charting Your Own Path: Anurima Bhargava's Lawyer-Leadership in Action

Davis Polk Leadership Initiative
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CASE STUDIES ON LAWYER-LEADERSHIP

Charting Your Own Path:
Anurima Bhargava's
Lawyer-Leadership in
Action



Columbia
Law School

INTRODUCTION

Anurima Bhargava (CLS '02) is an accomplished civil rights lawyer who has served as Chief of the Educational Opportunities Section of the Civil Rights Division at the U.S. Department of Justice and Director of the Education Practice at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. She is the Founder and Director of Anthem of Us, a strategic advisory and consulting firm that promotes dignity and justice in workplaces, schools, and communities, the Chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and produces and advises on documentary films. Throughout her career, Anurima has served on numerous task forces and working groups, including the White House Task Force to Prevent Campus Sexual Assault and the Supportive School Discipline Initiative. Anurima's career has been one of influence and impact.

Masked by this impressive biography is a winding and unpredictable career path, charted by a central but sometimes unacknowledged facet of lawyer-leadership: leadership of self. Like many successful lawyers, Anurima began her career in law with a federal judicial clerkship. Five months later, she left. In taking that risky and unorthodox step, Anurima realized that before she was prepared for an impactful career leading others and leading change, she first had to take command of her career and steer it in directions that were right by her and her principles, and right for her and the life she wanted to lead.

BACKGROUND

Starting in college and throughout her time as an investment banker before law school, Anurima aspired to become a civil rights lawyer. Not quite sure what that meant or how to get there, Anurima used her law school experience to expose possibilities, relying on her curiosities and interests to navigate the many opportunities presented. She interned with a human rights organization in South Africa, co-led a civil rights-focused student organization, and served as a Notes Editor on the Columbia Law Review. Throughout, she drew heavily on faculty, staff, and peer mentors to help her craft the customized experience she sought.

As Anurima worked out her post-graduation plans, she shared a common sentiment that judicial clerkships are an important opportunity for aspiring young lawyers seeking competitive legal jobs. When clerkship applications opened at the beginning of her 2L year, Anurima applied. Almost immediately, a federal district judge offered her a clerkship, and she accepted.

The clerkship did not proceed as Anurima expected. The judge for whom Anurima clerked was difficult, and she felt disparaged and belittled. When Anurima requested a morning off to attend the memorial of a friend who had passed away, the judge refused. Not long into her clerkship, Anurima learned that this was the unusual clerkship that recent law graduates occasionally chose to leave early, and she understood why.

Halfway through her clerkship, Anurima concluded that the situation was untenable. It was one in which it was impossible to learn or to operate with dignity. In deciding to leave, Anurima asked herself, as she would at other inflection points in her career: Can I thrive and feel valued as both a lawyer and a person in this position, and if not, how should I change my course?

LAWYER-LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Part One: Recruiting Allies and Identifying Opportunities

In applying for new jobs, Anurima cast a wide net, drawing heavily on students and professors with whom she had connected in law school who shared her passion for civil rights and public education. Having followed an unusual path out of a prestigious federal clerkship, she knew she might encounter challenges. One early opportunity that presented itself was a Skadden Fellowship the Legal Aid Society hoped to sponsor. Anurima applied but was not selected. Later, Anurima learned through a contact in Columbia Law School's pro bono office about a position at a non-profit that helps survivors of domestic violence. Anurima's mother had started a shelter for domestic violence survivors, and the issue was one she cared about. But it was not her passion. Advised by some to take the position for lack of other options, she hesitated: Should she accept a position that was available but not what she wanted to do? Or should she hold out for something aligned to her long-term goal of civil rights and education advocacy?

Part Two: Building Mentorship and Navigating Uncertainty

Anurima turned to a mentor, Ellen Chapnick, then Columbia Law School's Dean for Social Justice Initiatives. Dean Chapnick knew Anurima well. During Anurima's 1L year, Dean Chapnick held a mandatory training session for students like Anurima who had received summer human rights internships abroad. Anurima wanted to attend a McKinsey "boot camp" in Miami the same weekend. Friends predicted that Dean Chapnick would not allow anyone to miss the training for a McKinsey event because it would show a lack of commitment to public interest work. Anurima had a different view, and explained to Dean Chapnick that her interest in McKinsey—as well as her prior work as an investment banker—were in fact consistent with a deep commitment to becoming the dynamic, broadly skilled civil rights advocate Anurima aspired to be. Dean Chapnick granted Anurima permission to attend the McKinsey boot camp in lieu of the internship training. Anurima took from the experience that, conventions aside, being authentic and explaining her values and beliefs would allow others to understand her goals and help her reach them.

And so, when Anurima and Dean Chapnick discussed Anurima's decision about whether to take the domestic violence position, Dean Chapnick urged Anurima to stick to her interests and passions. Dean Chapnick expressed confidence in Anurima and in her ability to find a position that was the right fit. To support Anurima's search, Dean Chapnick introduced her to others who provided advice, guidance, and mentorship that informed Anurima's job search at the time and career moves in the years to come.

LAWYER-LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Part Three: Cultivating a Network and Pursuing Unexpected Paths

Eventually, an acquaintance among the wide net of people to whom Anurima had reached out told her about an opening in the New York City Department of Education Office of Legal Counsel. The position aligned with Anurima's long standing interest in public education and provided an opportunity to engage in a range of legal issues from the inside of the nation's largest school district. Anurima applied and within weeks found herself at the New York City Department of Education, as Chancellor Joel Klein undertook a radical restructuring of the city school system that would broadly influence urban public education nationwide.

Within a year, that position offered Anurima a bridge to becoming an education lawyer at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund—a position to which Anurima had aspired as a young college student. At the Department of Education, Anurima had the opportunity to work on a range of civil rights issues from the inside of a school district and the experience provided her with a firsthand understanding of what it could look like to advance institutional change that centers equity and justice. That set of experiences made her an ideal candidate for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

While at the Legal Defense Fund, Anurima worked on significant impact litigation, including *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School Dist. No. 1*, which the Supreme Court heard in 2007. In that case, Anurima spearheaded the amici curiae strategy, assembling a panoply of 50 briefs demonstrating the importance of racial diversity in schools. Through that effort, Anurima sought to bring into the conversation about school integration the voices of community members from across the country as she elevated and amplified their stories and perspectives.

A few years later, Anurima received an opportunity to lead the Educational Opportunities Section of the Civil Rights Division at the United States Department of Justice, where she had interned in her 2L summer. At the time she accepted the role, Anurima was the youngest chief of any section in the Civil Rights Division by many years.

LAWYER-LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Part Four: Thinking Creatively About Catalyzing Change

In 2016, Anurima left the Civil Rights Division and sought to consider how she could most effectively advocate for the change she had sought throughout her career. When Anurima and her Justice Department team were in Ferguson, Missouri following the police shooting of Michael Brown, she was struck by the trauma children in Ferguson had experienced. The trauma and equity and justice issues that children in Ferguson were facing were similar to those experienced by the children in many of the cases Anurima had worked on. She wondered whether there were other ways—outside legal advocacy—that she might spotlight and seek to address the trauma and injustices they faced.

Since then, Anurima has explored a variety of new advocacy tools to pursue justice for children and others. She has produced and advised on a number of documentary and other film projects highlighting the impact of racial and sexual violence on families and communities. In December 2018, House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi appointed Anurima to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which she now chairs. The Commission—which advocates for communities experiencing religious persecution and violence—has given Anurima the opportunity to join with leaders from across the political and ideological spectrum to advance common purposes. The experience forging effective partnerships with people whom in the past Anurima and her colleagues had thought of as actual or likely opponents added another tool in her fight for civil and human rights around the world.

Anurima's career has been one full of unexpected setbacks and opportunities. By remaining flexible, thinking creatively, building relationships, and remaining true to her values, Anurima has charted a life and a career that she is proud of.

THE PRACTICE OF LAWYER-LEADERSHIP

Leading Self, Leading Others, and Leading Change

Leadership of self is foundational to the work of a lawyer-leader. It is only with confidence, humility, and a clear understanding of one's own interests and values that leadership of others and change is possible. This case study, therefore, focuses on leadership of self—with the understanding that it is only through leadership of self that Anurima has been able to lead others and lead change.

Within leading self, Anurima's experience illustrates her exercise of the lawyer-leadership competencies of problem solving, learning and improvement, and vision and strategy. Throughout her time in law school and as a professional, Anurima has allowed her clear and powerful vision of herself—her passion for purposeful civil rights and education work and for advancing dignity and justice for all people—to drive her career.

Crucial to Anurima's early success was her ability to communicate her values and perspectives to those around her in ways that attracted mentors and allies. Anurima did this by participating in events that supported her passions and by connecting with people who shared her ideals. As she puts it, "People remember you being present. They remember the way you make them feel and how they feel around you; they remember if you're curious and interested and want to get engaged in their work in whatever way possible." Anurima set career goals rooted in her ideals and the impact she sought, rather than particular positions. And, she let that goal guide her decision making both as to the jobs she took and those she left or turned away.

Later in her career, Anurima pivoted away from the courthouse and into a variety of other spaces—documentary filmmaking, Anthem of Us, and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom—as a way to further advance the change she sought. With creative thinking and flexibility, Anurima found new spaces and new mechanisms to further civil and human rights.

Anurima also became adept at problem solving in service of her desire to stay in command of her career. Choosing to leave a clerkship midstream required a clarity of purpose in balancing a commitment she had made and its prestige against her own sense of self and need to resist an adverse work environment. Choosing not to take the next job that came along similarly required courage and focus on her long-term objectives.

Goals, however, are not enough without ways of achieving them—a need Anurima met with curiosity and resilience, drawing on her community of allies, seeking guidance and mentorship, and widely exploring opportunities. When a Skadden Fellowship did not materialize, and a

THE PRACTICE OF LAWYER-LEADERSHIP

Leading Self, Leading Others, and Leading Change (cont.)

domestic violence position did not match her goals, Anurima pressed on. By accepting an unexpected job for a civil rights-oriented lawyer in the General Counsel's Office of the New York City Department of Education, she gained valuable insights into how public education actually operated in the nation's largest school district and the range of legal issues that arise. That position prepared her in ways not often available to progressive lawyers to address issues of equity, diversity, and segregation at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, in government service at the Justice Department, and then independently in advising and providing counsel to institutions seeking to center equity and justice among their staff and operations through Anthem of Us. Anurima crafted a career that was unusual, unexpected, and most importantly, enabled her to tackle problems using a whole slew of strategies that drew both on her traditional legal training and the diverse set of other experiences that make up her career and her life.

By remaining open and responsive to feedback and being persistently mindful and self-reflective, Anurima also exercised learning and improvement. Throughout her job search, Anurima eagerly sought advice and guidance from Dean Chapnick, her Columbia Law School professors, and many others. She listened closely to what she heard, reflecting on how to apply what she learned to her own journey. Anurima would not have been able to reach her goals had she not approached the advice she received with an open—and simultaneously critical—mindset.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

For more information on Columbia Law School's Davis Polk Leadership Initiative and the ways in which it seeks to equip students with what they need to be effective Lawyer-Leaders in their lives, in their careers, and in the world, visit <https://leadership-initiative.law.columbia.edu/>.

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