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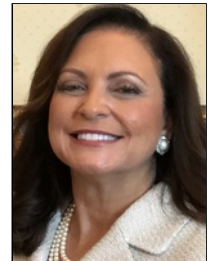
Expert Analysis - Series

Judging A Book: Brown Reviews 'Dangerous Leaders'

By U.S. District Chief Judge Nannette Jolivet Brown October 26, 2018, 3:53 PM EDT

This article is part of an Expert Analysis [series](#) of book reviews from judges.

Anthony C. Thompson's "Dangerous Leaders: How and Why Lawyers Must Be Taught to Lead" is a must-read for lawyers who find themselves at the pinnacle of leadership in a business or organization. As an incoming chief judge of the Eastern District of Louisiana, my prior service as a district court judge, and as a lawyer before that, certainly did not prepare me to lead my fellow judges, two unit executives who manage major court services, and dozens of other employees and staff at the court. Nevertheless, having previously led the New Orleans Sanitation Department in the early 1990s, and having been a deputy mayor and city attorney for New Orleans, I am impressed with Thompson's theories and recommendations on leadership.

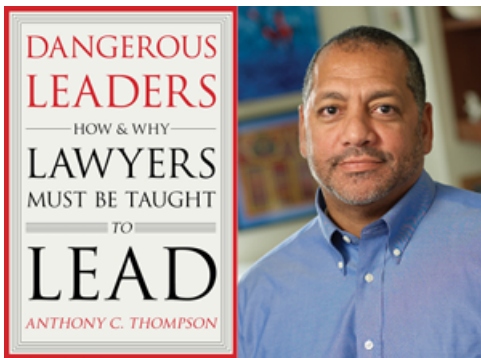


Judge Nannette Jolivet Brown

Early in the book, Thompson states that, "If we were to examine the major events or key decisions made in any industry in the world, we would likely find lawyers involved." He then goes on to write that, "[w]hether they work in a legal unit in a global company, as a partner in a law firm, or as an elected or appointed official in government, lawyers have obligations that often create an inherent tension in their role as a leader."

Thompson's book explores the conflict many lawyers face when they are charged with the responsibility of leadership. And he grippingly illustrates the harm that can be caused by faulty leadership through several examples, including the Flint, Michigan, water crisis, the New Jersey bridge scandal involving the Gov. Chris Christie administration, and, hitting close to home for me, the online blogging scandal that rocked the United States Attorney's Office in New Orleans under the leadership of Jim Letten.

In these examples, Thompson notes that the leaders surrounded themselves with a familiar staff that shared their thinking. In contrast, Thompson stresses that great leadership develops when we surround ourselves with diverse opinions and people who are not afraid to oppose our viewpoints. Particularly, he points out that, "[w]hen leaders assemble a team that operates as little more than an echo chamber, they miss concerns that a particular approach might raise; they miss the sharpened thinking that can come as a result of conflict and having to defend a position."



"Dangerous Leaders: How and Why Lawyers Must Be Taught to Lead," by Anthony C. Thompson. Stanford University Press. 240 pages.

Building on this idea, Thompson believes that the best leaders use and develop an "intersectional leadership" framework. This model places the leader at a cross-section of formal and informal networks, positioning him or her to utilize that nodal position to see further, perceive events more fully, and anticipate issues better.

The five components of intersectional leadership are: (1) developing and relying on a team that brings traits, styles and experiences dissimilar to the leader, (2) recognizing learning that comes from unlikely sources, (3) engaging in genuine collaboration, (4) adopting a mindset that insists on being suspicious of agreement, and (5) acting with moral courage, even behind closed doors. Thompson also explores the importance of leaders possessing emotional intelligence, including self-awareness and self-regulation. In describing an effective leader, he concludes, "To be effective, lawyer-leaders will need to move from being an individual contributor to one who connects people and networks for the good of the enterprise."

I was particularly drawn to Thompson's arguments that lawyer-leaders must develop practices that serve as an integrity check on acts carried out beyond public view, cast a broad shadow that sets a tone and shapes organizational culture, and prioritize learning from past mistakes. To illustrate the importance of these principles, Thompson highlights the Texas Harris County and New Jersey Cumberland County prosecutors' offices, where attorneys were found to have engaged in various types of race and sex discrimination. Thompson explains that leadership failed these offices because the leaders operated in an environment where no one from the outside could see what was going on.

Thompson also explores how we can learn about a leader's judgment, commitment and values when they face choices that have the ability to impede a personal, professional or political goal. He uses as examples two individuals. First, he highlights a judge up for re-election who ruled in favor of a defendant receiving the death penalty in order to appear "tough on crime." Then, he discusses former President Bill Clinton choosing not to intervene in the execution of a man found to have an IQ of 70, yet pardoning family members and donors in the last days of his presidency. By illuminating these examples, Thompson leans in on the important character traits of an effective leader.

Importantly, Thompson asserts that leaders must remain transparent when their decisions run into self-interest, subordinate their personal interests in the service of the greater good, and double down on their efforts to exercise independent judgment. He writes, "From the start, the decision to lead means working consciously to make your personal and individual interests secondary to the greater needs of the organization." He goes further to write, "adhering to a set of personal values and acknowledging tension that can influence or even alter a decision is critical if a leader intends to make just decisions and to act with moral courage." This chapter reminded me of the novelist James Lane Allen's famous quote: "Adversity does not build character, it reveals it."

Thompson also points out that "[l]awyer-leaders may need to step up and speak up even when the choice has the potential to threaten their work environment or even their career." As he puts it, if you see something, say something. Speaking of seeing, he also argues that lawyer-leaders have to "keep their head on a swivel," considering issues from multiple vantage points and using those insights to ask, "What if?"

Finally, Thompson argues that both law students and practicing lawyers need leadership education and training. He states, "Intersectional lawyer-leaders will need to appreciate the dynamics of the world in which they are operating and to accept that no single individual can have all the answers given the complexity of the decisions they will be expected to make." Moreover, "[i]f law schools seriously intend to prepare the next generation of leaders, they must recognize and embrace the duty to start the process of learning by exposing law students to leadership concepts and lessons through their pedagogy and substantive discussions."

Thompson proposes several ways in which we can better develop lawyer-leaders. First, he recommends that law schools start teaching leadership skills from day one and engage in group exercises that force students to step out of their usual boundaries. Next, he suggests that law schools offer a stand-alone course devoted to leadership. Finally, he argues that practicing attorneys should be encouraged to participate in leadership training.

After exploring Thompson's analyses of leaders and recommendations on leadership, I can say that his book is an excellent read for all lawyers. His insight is instructive not only for those who have obvious leadership roles in government and corporations, but also for lawyers who lead every day when they advise and counsel their clients. Every bit of the advice and observation addressed by Thompson in this book applies to and informs how lawyers should carry out their responsibilities to their individual clients, the community, and the bench and bar they serve.

Nannette Jolivet Brown is chief U.S. district judge for the Eastern District of Louisiana. She was nominated by President Barack Obama and joined the court in 2011. She became chief judge in May 2018.

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