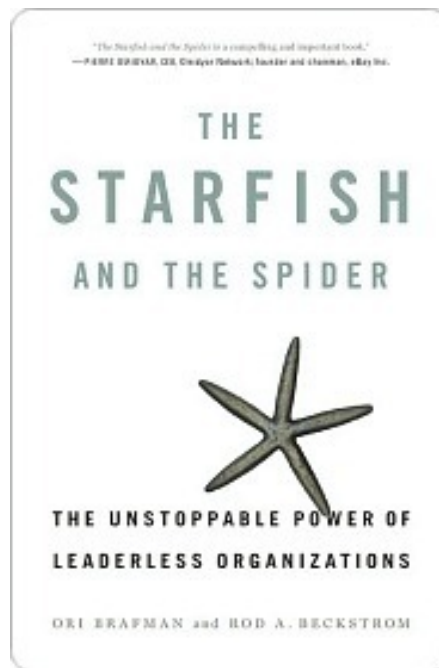




The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations

Ori Brafman , Rod A. Beckstrom

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If you cut off a spider's head, it dies; if you cut off a starfish's leg it grows a new one, and that leg can grow into an entirely new starfish. Traditional top-down organizations are like spiders, but now starfish organizations are changing the face of business and the world.

What's the hidden power behind the success of Wikipedia, craigslist, and Skype? What do eBay and General Electric have in common with the abolitionist and women's rights movements? What fundamental choice put General Motors and Toyota on vastly different paths?

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom have discovered some unexpected answers, gripping stories, and a tapestry of unlikely connections. *The Starfish and the Spider* explores what happens when starfish take on spiders and reveals how established companies and institutions, from IBM to Intuit to the U.S. government, are also learning how to incorporate starfish principles to achieve success.

The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations Details

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The Starfish and the Spider—the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations by Ori Brafman and Rod A Beckstrom

If you want to know about organizations like YWAM, read this book.

This book is an excellent story about centralized, decentralized and hybrid organizations. If you want to kill a spider, cut off its head. You cannot cut off the head of a starfish as it does not have one. If cut off the leg of an starfish, it will grow another.....starfish. This shows how decentralized organizations have always been around and take after the way that our brain's function. Once thought to operate in a hierarchy, latest research shows the opposite.

This book gives examples of the characteristics of decentralized organizations such as flexibility, shared power and ambiguity and how the Internet has spawned a new generation of decentralized organizations. It is a fascinating book.

Some principles of decentralized organizations;

- when attacked, they become even more open and decentralized.
- it is easy to mistake starfish for spiders.
- an open system doesn't have central intelligence, the intelligence is spread throughout the system.
- open systems can easily mutate.
- the decentralized organization sneaks up on you.
- as industries become decentralized, overall profits decrease.

They stand on 5 legs;

- Circles
- the Catalyst
- Ideology
- the pre-existing network
- the Champion

If you want to learn more about community, trust and openness in the 21st century, this is a must read. If you are Interested in how organizations like Al Qaeda can thrive with many in the world looking for them, read this book.

Ankit Singhal says

Must read if you like to understand how civilizations, society and organizations operate, the deeper pattern and meaning behind the structure and working of these social institutions.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

Organizations that are not centralized are powerful and almost impossible to kill. This is the message of this book. I was hoping it would be more prescriptive, as I could benefit from learning how to adopt principles of a starfish in circumstances at work, with two librarians down in my group. How can we function better so that when someone leaves, or is on leave, we can fill in those gaps more fluidly?

The book is really more of a description of leaderless organizations, from the side of the startled, traditional organizations who lost something when coming up against them. Well known starfish and spiders are described, and methods to defeat them are suggested. This may be useful to some corporate types, but just wasn't what I was looking for.

I'm not sure a book on how to build a leadership organization can exist anyway. It might violate a rule of quantum mechanics or something, to attempt to organize anarchy.

I did like the bit that contrasted the CEO with the "catalyst," and thought aspiring change agents could learn from it. ("In a starfish, the catalyst has the power.")

I also loved this quotation and it will be going on my bulletin board:

"Starfish systems are wonderful incubators for creative, destructive, innovative, or crazy ideas. Anything goes. Good ideas will attract more people, and in a circle they'll execute the plan. Institute order and rigid structure, and while you may achieve standardization, you'll also squelch creativity. Where creativity is valuable, learning to accept chaos is a must."

Russ Sanderlin says

I gave this book 3 stars because it is a little outdated in the examples they use to reinforce their idea of a decentralized (starfish) organization. With those handful of examples they continued to ride them hard though the book.

That's not to say it's not worth a quick read as there are a few good messages that come across in the book if you pay attention. There is an example about an individual that builds networks of people and it gives great insight on what is going through their mind to build those networks. For me, that is something that led me deeper to considering how I can bring additional value to those in my established network of professional associations and develop powerful new ones.

Just keep in mind it is written in 2005, but it still has some good business messages.

James says

Great! I wish Brafman had written this, and I could have read it, decades ago.

Brafman's thesis is that a centrally controlled organization is slowed by that central control, and can be paralyzed if something interferes with that system, while organizations that share a philosophy and goal, a knowledge base, and a methodology, but are not centrally managed, can't be stopped by a single point of failure. For one example, compare the dismal performance of centrally controlled industries and economies such as those under many totalitarian governments and the much more dynamic and successful performance of economies where no one is in charge. It's the reason that big businesses often do better with a franchise model than a wholly-owned model. For the best example of all, just look at the Internet - it was specifically designed to be impossible to knock out by destroying any node or section (by DARPA, as it was originally a Cold War project intended to survive a possible nuclear strike by the USSR.)

This bears closely on politics, warfare, and terrorism as well. This is the model that Al Qaeda made famous in that realm by supplying training, resources, and information to ideologically driven terrorist groups

worldwide without trying to choose or direct most of their operations. Applying these principles in a more legitimate and more limited way, the most responsive and effective military organizations are those that push decision-making authority down to the lowest practicable level, often the corporals or PFCs on the spot, telling them what the higher-ups want to happen but leaving it to them to work out the 'how' because they have the best picture of what's happening where they are. It's how the Wehrmacht worked, how the Israeli military works, how the U.S. Marine Corps works, and how special forces worldwide work, among other examples.

This model is the future of all large enterprises, I think, as events keep moving faster and the volume of information on any given topic keeps growing to the point where no central leadership can stay on top of it, even with computers and artificial intelligence. If - as many predict - humanity starts moving industries into space to use the resources in asteroids near Earth and in the main belt between Mars and Jupiter, it will become even more necessary - it's hard to micromanage when your phone calls have a lag time of hours each way.

Personally, this is the management model I've always preferred. When I was a company commander in the Marine Corps (over twenty years ago now) I had detachments scattered around southern California at times, as well as doing widely varied tasks at Camp Pendleton where we were based. My approach, which I learned from outstanding leaders I'd had, was to let my people know what needed to happen, let them figure out how, run interference for them, and make sure they got credit for their achievements when all was finished. Worked like a dream, and it was a whole lot easier and got better results than the micromanaging approach my predecessor and successor in that job felt they had to take.

Robert says

The book isn't profound, but it's an easy read that provides an effective contrast between hierarchical management and empowering human initiative and creativity.

Beau Raines says

This is one of those books that makes me feel both wowed and sad at the same time. This book gives great examples of the power of decentralization and letting the team or organization run itself. At the same time, it points out the weaknesses of very centralized organizations. Through these I see characteristics of teams I've been on and the way I want to work and the shortcomings of teams I'm on and been on and realize why they struggled.

The authors demonstrate the difference between starfish organisations, with multiple autonomous limbs, and spiders, hierarchical organizations with a single clear leader.

I read scenarios about Toyota, GM, Craigslist, P2P file sharing and the Apache and wonder why is it that hard for some teams to do this?

Starfish teams are empowered teams and that drives success. Those are the teams I want to be on.

I am in the early stages of a long project at work, in a spider organization that is trying to be more nimble and deliver faster. I'll try to impart these on the project team.

I strongly recommend this book and I'm thankful that it was recommended to me.

Sarah Hanawald says

I read this book a while ago, but a recent conversation caused me to revisit it. It's a pretty interesting read, but doesn't, to my mind, provide any major insights. It is true that de-centralized organizations are really hard to topple. The authors make this point again and again, coming back repeatedly to Napster and online file sharing as their prime example.

The thing is, that all the successful organizations they profile started with pretty low stakes. How many kids came up with ideas for software in their dorm rooms? Probably thousands, a few succeeded. Those who didn't surely mostly went on to live perfectly good lives. Free music doesn't work out? So what? Your auction site (eBay) fails? Again, people just go back to yard sales. Craig's list may be responsible for destroying newspapers, but it's by accident. The stakes didn't start there. The only organization with high stakes from the start was AA, and the stakes were only high to the alcoholics, many of whom society had already written off.

So--does this model of anarchistic leadership have anything to teach us about high stakes organizations? I don't know, the authors never go there. They do brush on organizations that are de-centralized, but that doesn't mean leaderless.

Nicholas says

Decentralized organizations can attain levels of power and flexibility unimaginable for tradition organizations. You just have to be willing to give up power over the goals.

quick book on the power of decentralization. goes well with brave new war.

Quotes:

"When attacked, a decentralized organization tends to become even more open and decentralized."

"Although the small P2P companies don't have many resources at their disposal, they're able to react and mutate at a frighteningly quick pace."

"Because they are autonomous, the units of a decentralized organization are almost always self-funding. In open organizations, there is often no central well of money."

"You follow someone - because you respect their skills and you like the results you get, not because the boss told you to."

"A catalyst gets a decentralized organization going and then cedes control to the members."

"By creating circles, tapping into an ideology whose time had come, drawing upon a pre-existing network, and joining forces with a champion, Stanton changed the course of history in the most Mary Poppins of ways. She set the events in action, inspired a movement, and then let go."

"Like you, they'd begin by mapping out all the people they know who might contribute. But they'd think about which people in their network could become advocates."

"When confronted with an aggressive push, most people shut down and become even less likely to change. Rogers practiced a different approach. Rather than suggesting ways for his client to change, he would acknowledge their experience...When people feel heard, when they feel understood and supported, they are more likely to change. A catalysts doesn't prescribe a solution, nor does he hit you over the head with one. Instead, he assumes a peer relationship and listens intently. You don't follow a catalysts because you have to - you follow a catalysts because he understands you. When we give advice to someone, we automatically create a power hierarchy. The advice-giver is superior to the recipient."

"When attacked, centralized organizations tend to become even more centralized."

"Once the Nant'ans had possession of a scarce resource - cows - their power shifted from symbolic to material. Where previously, the Nant'ans had led by example, now they could reward and punish tribe members by giving and withholding this resource. The cows changed everything. Once the Nant'ans gained authoritative power, they began fighting each other for seats on newly created tribal councils and started behaving more and more like would-be "presidents of the Internet"...The power structure, once flat, became hierarchical, with power concentrated at the top...Once people gain a right to property, be it cows or book royalties, they quickly seek out a centralized to protect their interests."

"The moment you introduce property rights into the equation, everything changes: the starfish organization turns into a spider. If you really want to centralize an organization, hand property rights to the catalyst and tell him to distribute resources as he sees fit. With power over property rights, the catalysts turns into a CEO and circles become competitive."

"Buyers were reluctant to switch to a new auction site where sellers didn't have a proven track record; they preferred to stay at eBay. Likewise, sellers with established positive ratings on eBay had a huge incentive to stay on the site rather than go elsewhere and start anew."

Jack says

I am happy I finally scratched this one off the list. Starfish and the Spider studies very distributed organizations. What the heck does that mean? Good question. We have been fighting them for decades. Terrorists. They operate in small, loosely networked cells. There really is no "leadership" per se. There are just cells and cells and cells. We wipe one out....there is usually another one the next day. One would say this is job security run rampant for us military types. Others would say these are very dangerous organizations. Ones that could pull off highjacking of jetliners for the use as missiles on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The one theme stressed over and over again is that these organizations are extremely difficult to destroy. There is no head...so targets are elusive. There is no Command and Control system. The US War Machine is a honed weapon that shattered the 4th largest army in the world in 1991. Again, the same machine was even better perfected and took down Iraq in a matter of weeks. Yet, the Machine is not geared to fight a small group of extremists huddled around a campfire in the remote wilderness. Don't get me wrong, I am not a doomsday guy here. The Taliban and Al Qaeda networks have paid dearly. One needs only to watch a FLIR video of the Apache Gunships in Afghanistan to see what the Machine can do. The other resonant theme is that of regeneration much like a starfish. We do have victories. Our folks are completing missions and taking bad guys down. Yet, there are more bad guys. And that has been what we have seen. The Taliban can take some punishment. We saw this before. We saw this in Vietnam. We can change the dates and delete Al Qaeda and replace with Viet Cong and we have the same thing. Overall the message of

the book is clear: be ready for some long nights and some tough times when dealing with loosely distributed, leaderless organizations.

Mark Gomer says

Informal, short, and light on detail. Some (rather scattered) good examples of organizations at various levels of centralization, including some discussion near the end on organizations featuring a mixture of centralized and decentralized features. Not very meaty, but easy to digest and containing some food for thought.

Lorna Pryor says

This book has the clue to the answer as to what we are to do about the corporations and the government ruining our country. It is OUR country. All of ours. Armed revolution is not the answer. It never works in the long run. We must do something that does work. Read this book and start thinking how it applies to everyday life. Remember geographic locations are real and people are real. Governments and "nations" are not real. They are made up, just like high school football teams, clouds, or Captain Jack Sparrow. If we do not acknowledge the reality of something, at a very profound level we put ourselves on a different vibrational level, the way television or radio waves go right through you but can't touch you. There used not to be any "Texas," for example. It's just a made up cookie cutter shape, kind of cool, as if the shape is something real, like the shape of a daisy or a turtle. But it's simple made up, like the McDonald's logo. The name is made up too. The mispronunciation of the name of a now extinct (want to guess why) Indian tribe. These things I am saying are not in this book. I am just expressing the thoughts that came to me after I read this cool book.

Lorna Pryor

B.J. Richardson says

This is a great business leadership book that has principles that can be applied to any organization. Brafman compares and contrasts centralized business models (spiders) with decentralized ones (starfish) with an obvious preference for and focus on the latter. He shows how you can spot decentralized organizations, what makes them work, and also what their potential weaknesses are. While the book is not yet that old, many of the examples he uses are already outdated. While the principles are still the same, he used so many "cutting edge" businesses in his writing that a decade in, the book's shelf life has already begun to expire. I would love to see a revised edition that updates to more modern examples (use piratebay rather than e-mule) or shows how some of the examples (like ebay) have adapted or changed in the intervening years.
