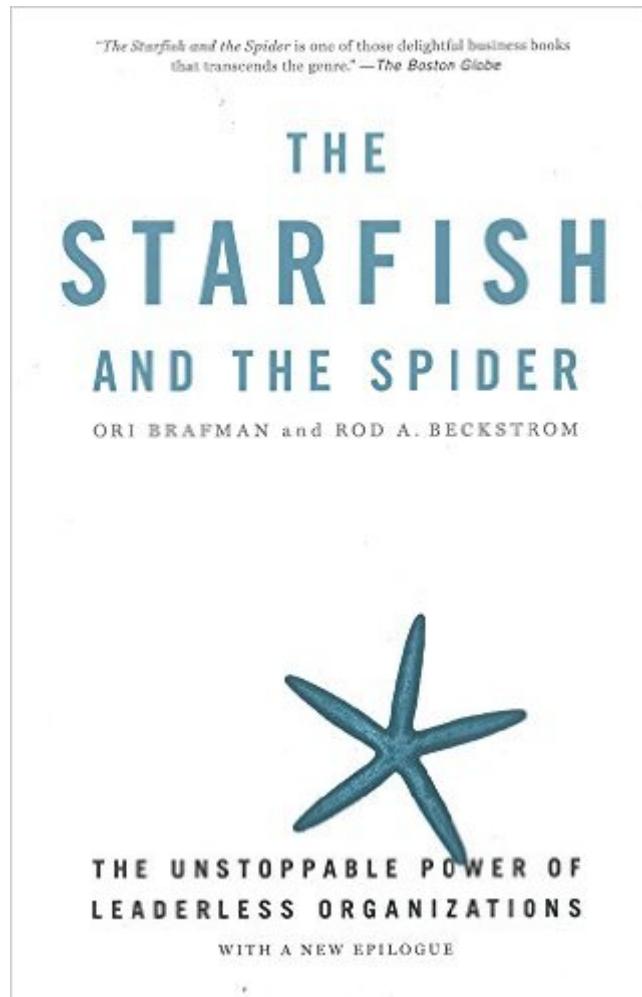


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# The Starfish And The Spider: The Unstoppable Power Of Leaderless Organizations



## **Synopsis**

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.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

No matter how you identify yourself in the human ecosystem -- worker bee, sheriff, manager, capitalist, entrepreneur, politician, healer, parent, activist or consultant -- this book is going to turn on lights in your brain. It's that multi-layered. It's also that packed with the kind of simply brilliant insights that are totally familiar, and you wonder why you didn't remember that you knew that. The Starfish and the Spider is about the power of individuals coalescing in groups of common interest and goals. It is about people doing things because they are important and meaningful to them. And how, under these circumstances, hierarchical control just isn't necessary. Using an eclectic group of examples that range from the guerrilla tactics of the Apaches against the colonial Spanish army to

the network of independent AA groups to a variety of Internet-driven modern companies, the book distills some clear principles about the structure, roles and ultimate "unstoppability" of healthy starfish organizations in surviving, growing and getting things done. Promoted as a business management book, this book has just as much value in many other realms. Specifically, it leads to interesting ideas in psychology, religion and spirituality, government, social activism, global diplomacy, and certainly no less, to individuals who are poised to become more active in their communities, local and global. The fundamental concepts are not new. The tribal system of collaboration and cooperation, based on trust and kinship, undoubtedly predates the emergence of power-based heirarchies. The effectiveness of grassroots movements is well known.

I have a childhood memory of building a go-cart. Every kid in the neighborhood was involved. Who was in charge? Whoever had the right answer in the moment of the next right thing to do. Hands, hearts, minds worked together, one idea building on another. It was an emergent experience in every sense of the word. The go-cart was more beautiful and functional than any one of us could have built alone. Before beginning to read *The Starfish and the Spider*, recall your own memories of magical groups in self organizing action. Whether you are a teacher, community leader, business owner, NGO officer, or corporate executive, this is a book worth reading. This is a book about the power and magic of groups engaged in self-organizing, non-hierarchical projects. Using stories of business, politics, activism and common interest groups, the authors show how such groups coalesce, grow and effect change, often in the face of tremendous "conventional" opposition. Some of the examples include Wikipedia, eBay, Skype, Napster and P2P sharing, al Qaeda, and many open source and decentralized projects which are ... starfish like. From the book: "Starfish have an incredible quality to them. If you cut an arm off, most of these animals grow a new arm. And with some varieties, such as the Linckia, or long-armed starfish, the animal can replicate itself from just a single piece of an arm. ... They can achieve this magical regeneration because in reality, a starfish is a neural network - basically a network of cells. Instead of having a head like the spider, the starfish functions as a decentralized network..." For me, one message of this book is that this "new" form of leadership does not need to be learned.

First of all, this book is well written and does a good job of articulating the characteristics and strengths of highly decentralized (so-called "leaderless") organizations. However, Mr. Brafman fails to include evidence that does not support his thesis that highly decentralized organizations are superior to highly centralized organizations. This review is focused on what the book leaves out.

Primarily, the book fails to address the weaknesses associated with leaderless organizations. While there are multiple tradeoffs associated with decentralization, one is that leaderless organizations cannot conduct complicated operations. For example, al-Qaeda (post-9/11), became extremely decentralized. They essentially became a leaderless organization. Since that time, they have been unable to achieve significant impacts. They used to have the ability to coordinate simultaneous attacks on multiple targets. Now, they are largely reduced to uncoordinated lone wolf operations. Synchronization generally requires some kind of guiding hand (i.e. centralized authority). Consider NASA. Would you really want a decentralized, leaderless organization building and operating the space shuttle? Ironically, one of the explanations for the shuttle disaster is that NASA had become too decentralized to effectively monitor and control shuttle operations. The more complicated the endeavor, generally, the more centralization is required. Also, in my opinion, the author often confuses the business with the service it provides. Consider Craigslist or E-bay - two examples used in the book. Both provide a service that essentially links buyers and sellers. But, then again, the local flea market does the exact same thing.

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