



Book Review

Ori Brafman & Rod Beckstrom 's (2006)

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

Why is the greatest military in the history of the world still fighting a war against a network of terrorists who can barely communicate from cave to cave? Why can't a team of the highest-priced lawyers stop teenagers from downloading free music via peer-to-peer software? In *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom explain that it's because spiders don't know how to defeat starfish.

The Spiders are the standard, hierarchal organization. Their structure consists of a leader with several subordinates, each of whom also have subordinates. This type of structure is a very top down approach to organizing leadership. Control & decision-making are contained in one part of the spiders' body: its head. It's the head that is responsible for all decisions. For example, if the spider wants to move somewhere, its head notifies its legs of where they're going and they're off. If the spider's head becomes injured or severed from its body, the spider will die.

A starfish, on the other hand, is an example of system where decision-making is distributed throughout the entire organization. Control and decision-making are distributed across the entire body. If the starfish wants to move somewhere, each individual leg makes the

decision to move. If the leg of a starfish were to become severed from its body, that starfish would simply grow a new leg. The severed leg will, in turn, grow into an entirely new starfish.

Spider organizations are centralized and rely on visible and controlling leaders. Starfish organizations are decentralized and do not rely on one specific leader. What happens when a spider fights a starfish? The spider will fight it like a spider. It will sever a limb of the starfish, and the starfish will grow another. The cycle will continue until a) the spider loses from fatigue or b) the starfish ceases to be a starfish (stops being leaderless).

Typically, leadership books tend to focus on defending or establishing a leadership theory. However, Brafman and Beckstrom lay a foundation for a new field: leaderless theory. As society becomes more connected,

leaderless organizations are becoming more common. *The Starfish and the Spider* makes a compelling case that it is time for us to study them for organizations to gain the insight to adapt and become more starfish like. The starfish and the spiders are battling, and the starfish are winning convincingly.

