

[The Starfish and the Spider

By Doug Kirkpatrick

The Starfish and the Spider (Portfolio, 2006) is written by two superb dot-connectors, Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, who weave such seemingly random topics as anthropology, the Great Barrier Reef, chemistry, Burning Man, industrial theory, Alcoholics Anonymous, web culture and the war on terror into a tightly-knit quilt of logic covering the fascinating phenomenon of leaderless organizations.

Their metaphor of the starfish and the spider is pretty simple: with a spider, if you cut off the head, it dies. A starfish, on the other hand, doesn't have a head. Its life-force runs throughout its body—cut off an arm, and it will grow into a brand new starfish. Brafman and Beckstrom's argument is straightforward: the more organizations can adopt the characteristics of the starfish, the more powerful they will become relative to more hierarchical (spider) organizations.

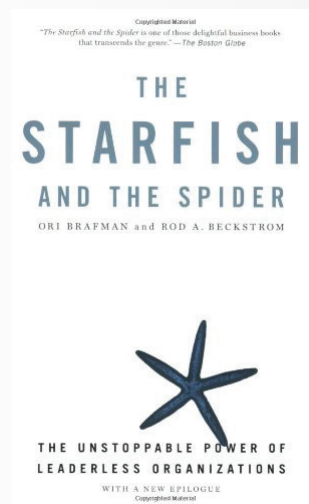
The real joy of this book lies in the myriad examples the authors use to flesh out their arguments. One such example is the way that they relate their spider metaphor to the well known story of Cortes. In 1519, Cortés met Montezuma in Tenochtitlán, the vibrant city of ancient Aztec civilization. Cortés, with his goal of becoming rich by appropriating the Aztecs' gold, had Montezuma killed. Within two years, Aztec civilization had completely collapsed. With control of the American continent in hand, the Spanish went north in the 1680s only to encounter the fierce Apache tribes. The story of the Apaches, however, had a slightly different ending than that of the Aztecs--this time, the Spanish lost. How did they so easily defeat people with thriving, powerful cities and yet lose to a tribe

without towns, gold or even a ruler?

The startling answer: Apache culture was a decentralized starfish, unlike the spider-like Aztecs. The Apaches, lacking any physical infrastructure, simply melted into the landscape to coordinate raids on the Spanish interlopers. Not only did they hold off the Spanish in the late 1600's, but did so for another two hundred years—and remained a threat to outsiders until 1914! Some would point to Geronimo as a key leader during this time—but the Apache concept of leadership was utterly unlike that of the Aztecs. Apache leaders were called Nant'ans, inspirational leaders *utterly lacking in coercive power*. Apparently, the idea of coercion doesn't even exist in Apache culture. Hence, the befuddled Spanish (and later the American cavalry) didn't really know to deal with the Apaches. And therein lies an important warning for modern organizations, particularly those of the spider variety: according to the book, the harder one fights a decentralized opponent, the stronger it gets.

The highest praise for this book, though, comes from the author himself. Recently, author Rod Beckstrom told NPR's Steve Inskeep that he was surprised to learn that *The Starfish and the Spider* is a hit with the Tea Partiers—but that it made sense, saying that the book “is really a guidebook for people, to help organize decentralized movements and organizations of any type.”ⁱ •

ⁱ *Why The Tea Party Is Like A Starfish, Not A Spider* <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129310098>



[Is Self-Management Scalable?

By Doug Kirkpatrick

One of the most frequent comments I receive when talking about self-management goes something like, “That sounds like a great theory, but it would never work in my business...organization...department...etc. because we're too big...centralized...culturally diverse...etc.”

Inherency is a concept from the world of policy-making. The idea is that if there are no inherent barriers to creating a particular reality, then that reality is possible (not necessarily easy or inexpensive, but

possible). So let's examine the inherent barriers to scaling up self-management with a brief example, keeping in mind that self-management crucially depends on: (1) the absence of coercive power, and (2) accountability for commitments.

An entrepreneur with a new design for a super-efficient hydrogen-powered car wants to start a car company. She creates a business plan and sells it successfully to a venture capital firm. She hires a chief engineer to design a factory. She hires a construction firm to build the factory. She hires a staff consisting of a production expert, accounting expert, HR expert, legal expert, distribution and logistics experts, marketing and sales experts, and several others. All selected leaders possess high levels of technical competence and ability to work as a team. The team designs a process to select people for the factory, and staffs the factory for startup. Decision rights for all business decisions (includ-

ing strategic), are negotiated and allocated to the person or persons with the most expertise bearing on a decision—including assemblers on the factory floor. People commit to responsibility for those decisions and their consequences. Resources, training and tools are available to support all business decisions—including training in the theory and practice of self-management.

Here's the thought experiment, and we'd love to hear your thoughts: in this example, where is the requirement for coercion, and what prevents people from holding each other accountable for commitments? Remember, we're talking about concrete inherent barriers, not cost or simplicity. •

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