

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of “The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations”

Ori Brafman & Rod A. Backstrom, London, UK; Penguin Books Ltd. (2006)

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Authors Ori Brafman and Rod Backstrom utilize the powerful analogy of the spider and the starfish to compare and contrast organizational structure in the context of the amount of emphasis placed on the role of a leader. An organization in which the leader’s role is highly emphasized is compared to a spider (centralized). An organization where this role is de-emphasized is compared to a starfish (decentralized).

Brafman is an entrepreneur who holds a BA in peace and conflict studies from the University of California-Berkeley and an MBA from Stanford University. Backstrom is a technology start-up businessman who holds a BA and MBA from Stanford University. The authors fuse their business expertise with biological science and historical case studies to provide an interesting and entertaining account of organizational leadership.

This analogy begins with an explanation of how memory in the brain operates. One would think that memories are stored in a central repository, however scientists are realizing this is not the case. Rather, when memory is activated, it pulls from multiple networked areas of the brain. This mechanism enables the brain to retain memory despite damage to certain portions of it. In the same manner, the authors examine organizations that function using this decentralized type of structure, which is similar to that of a starfish. When the arm of a starfish is cut off, it will grow back and the arm that was removed will regenerate as a new starfish. In this sense, by attacking a decentralized structure you actually increase its ability to thrive. This was the case for the Apache nation when attacked by the Spaniards in the 17th Century. The “flexibility, shared power, ambiguity—made the Apaches immune to attacks that would have destroyed a centralized society” (p. 21). This example is far different from the spider-like society of the 16th Century Aztecs, where the Spaniards killed Montezuma II and then rapidly conquered a leaderless indigenous people.

The book continues by explaining the ingredients and value of decentralized types of organizations. The first ingredient is that norms instead of rules drive action. Second, a person emerges as a catalyst to get a movement started, but then fades away or moves on to start a movement with a different population. The third ingredient, an ideology – the ‘why’ – is established and serves to motivate people to commit to this organization. Fourth, this ideology leverages a pre-existing network of people willing to take up the cause. Lastly, a figure emerges willing to champion the cause, not to be its leader but instead to be its promoter. In order for decentralized organisms or organizations to move or advance – whether that be an organism like a starfish or toward a vision for a business – all significant parts of the starfish or business must convince each other of the appropriate movement. In other words, leadership under this decentralized model occurs via consensus not through authoritative directives and hence there is buy-in and ownership by the majority of individuals in the organization. In addition, decentralized companies like Wikipedia or Craigslist develop trust with the users which creates a willingness to contribute to the conversation and introduce diversity of thought, leading to innovation. These types of organizations tend to outlast and outperform their more centralized rivals.

The authors do offer three ways in which a centralized organization can combat a decentralized one; however, they require a radical shift in thinking. First, you must change the ideology of the decentralized organization. An example of this would be through bringing hope to where it currently doesn’t exist (such as in third world nations). Second, you must centralize them. The United States government eventually achieved this with the Apaches by giving them cattle. Once they had an economic good, they ceased their nomadic lifestyle and the decentralized structure associated with it. Third, decentralize your own organization. Basically follow the edict if you can’t beat them join them. The authors conclude by stating that in our current global economic

state, in order to be successful, businesses must find the hybrid sweet spot and constantly be balancing between centralization (as a mechanism to obtain profit), and decentralization (to ensure innovation/relevance).

Organizations seeking to develop leaders might take away some valuable insights from this book. The launching of institution-wide programs would likely benefit from ensuring the analogous arms of its “starfish” agree to this change. These stakeholders must come to consensus that the change is in the appropriate direction. A second takeaway directly applies to leader development institutions such as the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). Here, in terms of the required ingredients, we have a catalyst and integrator (Center for Character and Leadership Development), existing network (Commandant of Cadets, Faculty, Athletic Director and Airfield), and a champion for leader development at USAFA (Superintendent). Shifting more from rule to norms-and more coherently communicating our ideology as to what a leader of character is and how USAFA can develop them – would serve leader development institutions well. Lastly, we should view USAFA’s cadets as more decentralized than the staff and faculty. In order to lead cadets in their leader development journey, faculty and staff members should consider seeking to change a cadet’s ideology, give them a more centralized structure in which to operate, and engage them in a more decentralized manner.