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THE STARFISH AND THE SPIDER



A spider is a creature with a head and eight legs coming out of a central body. If you chop off its head, it dies. It has a centralized control system like most organizations.



Starfish are decentralized and don't have a head. To move, one leg starts moving, and then, in a process not fully understood, the other legs cooperate. A host of emerging organizations function in a decentralized manner similar to starfish. Examples that would be well known in North America include Visa, Skype, Craig's List, Wikipedia, Alcoholics Anonymous and Apache Software, to name a few.

Ori Brafman, in *The Starfish and the Spider*, identifies five legs of a decentralized network.

Circles (Leg 1) are autonomous groups of 6-12 members and provide the vehicle for empowering ordinary people with immense power. Once you join, you're an equal and do your best to contribute. They have defined values that control behavior.

A **Catalyst** (Leg 2) initiates a reaction without fusing into that reaction. They are good at navigating complex social networks and initiate reactions by sharing ideas. When activities emerge, they fade into the background and cede control to others but continue to inspire action. Catalysts are mission oriented, not objective driven.

Ideology (Leg 3) is the glue. It is a shared set of beliefs that inspire members to fight and sacrifice for a common cause. Since there is no central command, these beliefs define the values, which in turn, dictate the cultural DNA. The greater the common cause, and stronger the ideology, the longer the network will last.

Pre-Existing Networks (Leg 4) are critical to launching decentralized networks. Centralized organizations are not setup to launch decentralized movements. Loose knit social networks provide the ideal breeding ground for autonomous circles and have a higher tolerance for ambiguity and innovation.



Catalysts enter the social networks and birth decentralized movements. The Internet provides an ideal launch pad by enabling rapid and simple communication, and active participation.

Champions (Leg 5) are restless pioneers in promoting the new idea. They move the network forward to the next level. They are tenacious, hyperactive, will not stop until finished, and operate well in non-hierarchical environments

When a Catalyst joins up with a Champion to architect a movement, create self-empowered circles, tap into an ideology whose time has come, and draw upon a pre-existing network, they together can change the course of history●

For more, check out the book, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*, by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, Portfolio Trade, 2008