

Book Review: *The Starfish and the Spider*

Brafman and Beckstrom's (2007) book, *The Starfish and the Spider - The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations* (Starfish), suggested that leaderless organic organizations power transformative organizations from terrorist organizations to multinational-corporations. Though the book's tenor indicated that the intended audience is the same as popular business self-help books, it has displayed the unique ability to act as a platform for launching discussions of organizational behavior, leadership, and culture. The two authors, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, have extensive consulting experience in distributed networks, strategic inclusion, creative leadership, the internet of things, a variety of non-governmental and governmental organizations, adding expertise and academic strength to their arguments ("Berkeley," n.d.; "Premiere Speakers," n.d.; "Stanford Cyber," n.d.). Much of the theoretical underpinnings expressed in Starfish mirror organizational behavior theory expressed in adhocracy and clan cultures, human resource, political, and symbolic frames, and moving to corporate greatness through creative excellence (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Collins, 2009; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). Starfish is not particularly original, but the writing style is conversational, intriguing, and filled with anecdotal evidence, reinforcing its value as a discussion starter rather than contributing to the academe.

Starfish suggests that leaderless organizations would be optimized if they operated as independent companies, divisions, and locations, like how the separate legs of several species of starfish act separately (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) illustrated the Starfish model's validity by relating the story of the "grandmother cell" (p. 5). Jerry Lettvin sarcastically described the then-current theory that human long-term memory was encoded in a single location or cell, much as modern computers store information in fixed addressable

locations (Andrew, 2011; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Lettvin argued and demonstrated that memories, such as a grandmother's memory, were distributed across large portions of the brain, networked together rather than stored in a single grandmother cell (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Organizations with leadership spread as memory is distributed in humans are more creative, responsive, and efficient than hierarchically structured firms.

Attitude Toward the Internet of Things: Chapters One, Two, and Three

The governance and structure of the internet of the twenty-first century are not based on a legal system but technologies, user organizations, industry standards, and crowd-sourced participation (Rens, 2019). The first three chapters of *Starfish* tell how modern internet communication and commerce, known as the internet-of-things (IoT), obey a technological social structure rather than modern societal laws, causing disruption and havoc (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Rens, 2019). The core element of IoT's disruptive influence on current social and economic norms, according to Rens (2019), is the conflict between pre- IoT and post- IoT property rights. Since the IoT is a loose organization of independent businesses, coders, users, and governmental jurisdictions, organized in a distributed leadership structure, the ability to enforce compliance is nearly impossible (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Goksoy, 2016).

Organizational Leadership and Culture

Starfish offered anecdotes from companies and people that operate inside and outside of the IoT to bring clarity to the social problems and power of distributed leadership, clan and adhocracy cultures, and the weaknesses of a purely political frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). The first example of the IoT conflicting with the pre-IoT culture offered in *Starfish* was the clash between the business model of the recording industry and peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing systems (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007;

Bridy, 2009). MGM, a recording company, was a powerful hierarchical organization operating in a political frame that viewed recording artists as human capital and the public as co-dependent users (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). Napster, the first P2P in music, provided an illegal but nearly untraceable method of downloading music stored on users' computers, sidestepping the payment of royalty fees to MGM and a lesser degree, the artists (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Bridy, 2009). MGM's effort to squash P2P users, which operate as globally distributed IoT family organized cells, mostly failed (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). Starfish uses the MGM example to suggest that organizations like Napster, leaderless organic hybrid cultures, are superior to traditionally structured political organizations (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007).

Attitude and Organic Growth

Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) used chapters two and three, 'President of the Internet' and 'Sea for Starfish', to exemplify the inability of structural organizations to adapt to the turbulence introduced by the advent of the IoT and the organic growth of leaderless organizations. To illustrate the depth and speed of the IoT's turbulent wake, Barnet (2001) noted that in 1977 Sun Microsystems, one of the early proponents of the internet, answered the question of who and how people use the internet by reporting that "they don't" (p. 217). By 2007, the growth of the internet was so ubiquitous that sites were coming into existence weekly (Barnet, 2001). In this culture, leaders who were supported by teams that had sustained adhocracy or clan cultures could cast a vision of the future. Likewise, the best technological wizards could help a firm move from obsolescence to greatness through rapid and continuous innovation (Collins, 2009; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). According to Roos and Kazemi (2018), current usage can be described as omnipresent in wired countries. Roos and Kazemi found that

the internet has become an essential part of daily life for information searches, communication technologies, shopping, music, games, and visual entertainment. The growth of the IoT is so dramatic that it has become a disruptive influence on those who have not adopted IoT.

Starfish presented an example of a group of investors operating in 1995 that could not grasp the concept of IoT as decentralized, leaderless, and innovative (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). They demanded to know who the IoT leader was (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). According to Brafman and Beckstrom, Netcom was looking for international investors for internet-based businesses, and the CEO had to claim that he was the "president of the internet" (p. 32) to get them to begin the conversation. This illustration was intended to describe the conflict between a 'spider' like organizational culture and structure and a 'starfish' organization. According to Brafman and Beckstrom, a spider was functioning as a hierarchical organization where a structural frame ruled a hierarchical culture (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Kinicki & Fugate, 2016). A starfish symbolized the antithesis of a spider organization, representing freedom of action, distributed leadership, innovation, and rapid unstructured turbulent change. Brafman and Beckstrom's use of spiders and starfish in opposition is the basis of Starfish's assertion that leaderless organizations are superior to structural hierarchies.

Structure of an Unstructured Organization: Chapters 4, 5, and 6

In an ironic twist, after having championed leaderless and unstructured organizations, Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) offer a format for a decentralized organization based on the five legs of some starfish. The starfish metaphor was used to illustrate that a leaderless firm or group should be structured similarly to a starfish, which after having a leg cut off continues, and grows a new one (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). The five metaphorical legs of the Brafman and

Beckstrom (2007) unstructured structure include circles, a catalyst, ideology, a preexisting network, and a champion (pp. 88-98). Not only do these five 'legs' offer a metaphorical structure, but they also provided a prescriptive framework for creating a leaderless organization. It is difficult to imagine how a structure can be followed to develop a lack of system.

Circles

Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) posited that circles, which are cells or small independently operating groups, existed in most decentralized groups. Brafman and Beckstrom presented the American Apache as a historical example of a group organized as a circle or cell. The Apache is a tribe of peoples inhabiting North America since their theorized migration from Asia over 10,000 years ago and which moved into the American South-west between 1000 and 1600 years ago ("Apache Tribe," 2021; Tweedie, 1968). The Apache tribal organization was loose, sharing a common ancestral origin and a strong belief of local family or clan organizational structure (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Tweedie, 1968). The Apache clan were decentralized organizations, with each group deciding their actions independently from other Apache units ("Apache Tribe," 2021; Tweedie, 1968).

Another metaphorical model for a leaderless, decentralized structure is al-Qaeda (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Gartenstein-Ross & Barr, 2018; Helfstein & Wright, 2011). Helfstein and Wright (2011) found that one of the difficulties of tracing al-Qaeda was that it was organized more as a social movement network of cells operating independently without a centralized command and control feature. Gartenstein-Ross and Barr (2018) question if al-Qaida was even a "single, coherent organization" (p. 68), suggesting that it had no hierarchy or formal structure. Networked social movements are leaderless and operate on an egalitarian basis where

each group is responsible for fulfilling their mission as they see fit, which seems to describe al-Qaida's decentralized circular structure (Nikiporets-Takgawa, 2017).

A circular organizational structure like Apache clans and al-Qaeda, when viewed through Bolman and Deal's (2017) *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*, operate as human-resource (HRF) and symbolic (SF) frames. Viewing circle or cell firms through the lens of competing values framework (CVF) theory, flexibility, family-like support, and creativity suggest a clan-adhocracy (C-A) cultural structure (Rukh & Qadeer, 2018). The CVF is an organizational behavior theory that is used to classify an organization's enacted behaviors. Consequently, Brafman and Beckstrom's (2007) cell structure expresses HRF, SF, and C-A cultural behaviors, suggesting supportive, close-knit, creative, flexible organizations.

A Catalyst

A catalyst in Starfish is a person who sets disruptive changes in motion but does not have anything to do with the institution's continuation (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) found that the catalyst left the organization without assuming further control once the business was launched. However, the catalyst does leave behind stories, motivation, and purpose (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Burbach and Reimers-Hild (2019) described this type of leadership as transformational leadership because of facilitation, innovation, adaptation, and creativity. Research has determined that leadership that pursued ethical, social ends through inspiration were hallmarks of C-A cultures in the CVF (Pasricha et al., 2018; Rukh & Qadeer, 2018).

Ideology

Starfish proposed that ideology, a driving faith in a firm's and workers' aligned sense of community and greater purpose, was one of the critical success factors necessary for a catalyst to

convert a worker into a dedicated member of a circle or cell (Brafman and Beckstrom, 2007). A well-constructed organizational purpose with a compelling cultural story or artifact "makes the case for change internally and externally," allowing transformational leadership to communicate the driving purpose to the group (Burk, 2020, p. 1). The element of ideology is so critical to excellence and success that Ferdowsian (2016) stated that it was a critical success factor alongside collaboration and leadership growth. If the purpose is communicated well and has achieved group buy-in, then a team member would continue to strive for excellence even in the face of severe turbulence and failure.

Preexisting Network

Collaboration with a preexisting resource network is beneficial to startups and another critical success factor to sustainability (Stayton & Mangematin, 2019). Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) suggested that every successful decentralized body had a powerful ideology or greater purpose and a charismatic catalyst, also utilized a preexisting resource network to overcome obstacles common to all startups. However, Stayton and Mangematin (2019) found that the network was not an independent variable that controlled success accelerant to achieving sustainability. This Starfish leg is more of a strategic tool than a cultural element but shares creativity and marketing with adhocracy and market cultures. These marketing characteristics indicate that standard operating procedures are beneficial and another ironic finding for an unstructured framework.

The Champion: Spokesperson

The concept of a product champion is heavily represented in marketing literature as celebrity endorsement (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007; Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020).

According to Starfish, a product champion is charismatic, meaning that they are an over the top

product spokespersons (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). Marketing management literature suggested McCracken's (1989) meaning of transfer model remains the most used framework for explaining successful spokesperson engagements. A spokesperson who can transfer their enthusiasm to the users is the best spokesperson (Hunt, 2020). That ability qualifies them as Starfish 'champions' (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007). However, a refinement of the transfer model proposed by Choi et al. (2005), suggested a highly engaged celebrity who focused on culture and impact acted as aspirational role model and they have the best success in championing products and services (as cited in Schimmelpfennig & Hunt, 2020). This leg of the Starfish model aligns with the symbolic frame and a marketing-adhocracy culture, where inspiration and sales are aligned.

There is No Such Thing as a Leaderless, Structureless Organization: Chapters 7, 8, 9

The last three chapters flow from the previous six chapters in that the inevitable conclusion is that there is no such thing as a pure leaderless hierarchical system. Conversely, there is no such thing as a pure autocratic dictatorship. If there are two or more people, there will be two or more lenses that color the perceptions of all of those involved. Brafman & Beckstrom (2007) presented eBay, an IoT marketplace, as an example of a deliberate hybridization of a leaderless firm and a structured management system. Barry and Kingwill (2020) noted that hybrid governance might be inescapable, even at the nation-state level. Hybrid control opens the door to negotiated actions, allows for sense-making, provides a reliable structure for flexibility and commonality through knowledge acquisition, all circumscribed by the resources of the greater group (Barry & Kingwill, 2020; Zandbergen, 2017). The nature of hybrid organizations screams for acknowledging Bolman and Deal's (2017) political frame, where the harmonizing of the other various frames from other group members is facilitated.

Starfish calls the space between structured and unstructured leadership, where the organization performs optimally, the "sweet spot" (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2007, p. 189). Brafman and Beckstrom's (2007) sweet spot provides optimal results when management utilizes what Starfish calls the "new world" (p. 199). Accepting the new world requires strategic and cultural integration of IoT. Starfish proposed a flexible, collective leadership working within a more extensive, partially decentralized structure, sensitive to the rapid advancement of the IoT.

Starfish's Place in Organizational Behavior and Leadership Theory and Praxis

The thrust of this book is not the presentation of a new theory for organizational leadership and culture. Instead, Brafman and Beckstrom (2007) present the metaphor of a Starfish and a spider to champion decentralized structures. The two illustrations are analogous to a CVF where the flexibility and discretion of clan and adhocracy cultures compete with the stability and control of hierarchy and market cultures (Kinicki & Fugate, 2016; Rukh & Qadeer, 2018). The balancing required to a hybrid organization, which Starfish describes at the end of the book, is also explained by Bolman and Deal (2017) by suggesting that leadership and management must view an organization through many frames rather than only one. I find Starfish a simplistic but well-written basic introduction to organizational leadership and behavior praxis and theory. Its pedagogical place is a launching pad for discussion and further research. Furthermore, I can recommend Starfish as a leadership-as-practice self-help book.

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