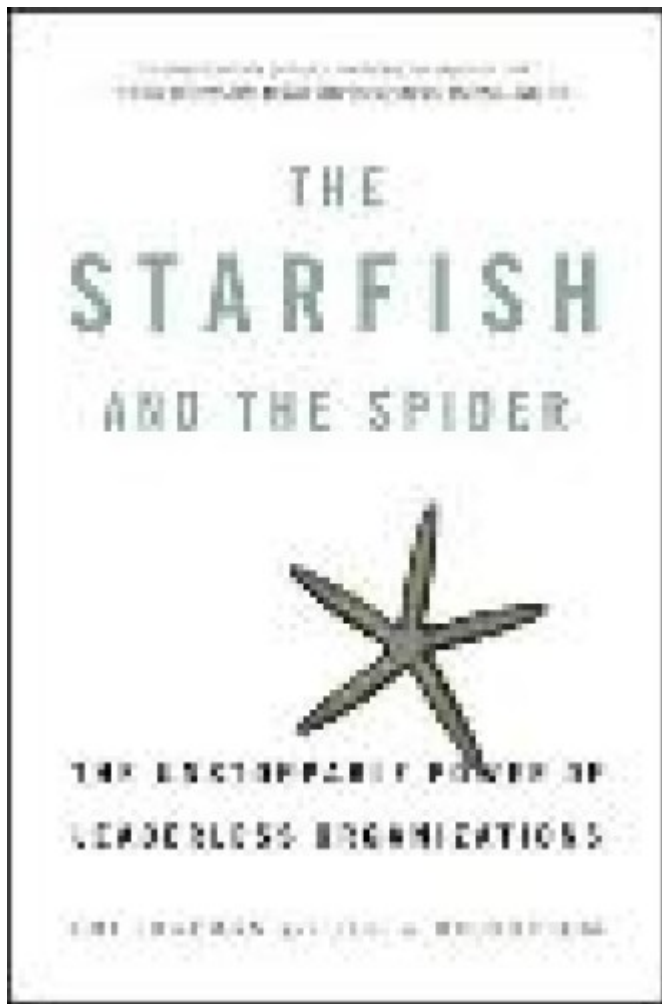


# Loosen up

By [Barbara Brown Zikmund](#) in the [September 18, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



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

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom  
Portfolio

When my neighbor began having memory problems that were more than “senior moments,” she went to the doctor. Neurological tests showed that the problems she was having dated back to a time when she was a child. The doctors said that something had happened, perhaps at birth, that had prevented normal brain development. For almost 50 years her brain had found alternative neurological tracks that enabled her to live a full life, even though the tests suggested that she ought to have been dysfunctional or mentally handicapped. Yet she was a 50-year-old woman with a family, a graduate degree, and a brain that had perfected highly unconventional ways to cope with life.

This diagnosis was both inspiring and sobering. The neurological resiliency that had enabled her brain to bring order out of chaos was impressive. At the same time, the innovative mental gymnastics that had served her so well were faltering with age. Although she had no disease, her brain was losing its capacity to sustain its highly complex ways of coping.

I thought of my neighbor when I read this book by Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, who are both activists and entrepreneurs. The book begins with neurological science. Scientists have attempted to track brain activity by looking for predictable patterns and trying to map memory links. Yet research invariably shows neurons lighting up in random and chaotic patterns. Hierarchical or predictable sequences in human brain activity are rare. Why would such a highly complex organ as the human brain evolve in such an odd way? Because, the book argues, “decentralization makes the brain more resilient.”

Brafman and Beckstrom take their cues from neurochemistry to suggest that decentralized organizations, like decentralized brains, are stronger than ones that follow hierarchical models. “This book is about what happens when no one is in charge. . . . You’d think that there would be disorder, even chaos. But in many areas, a lack of traditional leadership is giving rise to powerful groups that are turning industry and society upside down.”

Most organizational leaders assume that centralization (captured in the metaphor of the spider) is the model for success, when in fact decentralized entities (defined by the starfish) are often more successful. “If you cut off a spider’s leg, it’s crippled; if you cut off its head, it dies. But if you cut off a starfish’s leg, it grows a new one, and the old leg can grow into an entirely new starfish.” This is not only a secret of

biology, Braffman and Beckstrom claim; it is also the hidden power behind many of the most innovative and successful businesses. This is what has determined the success of Wikipedia, Craigslist and Skype. It is why eBay and General Electric have a lot in common with the abolitionist and women's rights movements of the 19th century. It is why General Motors has faltered and Toyota succeeded. All of these successful businesses have featured a starfish model, relying not on a top-down hierarchy but on the power of peer relationships.

In their analysis of organizations, the authors note some interesting anomalies. When decentralized organizations are attacked, they do not become more centralized. They become increasingly decentralized and open. Flexibility is their strength. Starfish organizations lack centralized intelligence. Knowledge and intelligence permeate their whole system. This decentralized knowledge allows various aspects of the organizations to respond and adjust when under stress.

For many of us decentralization seems counterintuitive. We've assumed that success is the result of growth and consolidation. Bigger and more centralized is better and more efficient. It is good when local stores are bought by chains that became part of national and international conglomerates. Braffman and Beckstrom report, however, that when industries centralize, overall profits actually decrease. The most vital businesses in the world are starfish, not spiders.

Starfish organizations are diverse, and it is difficult to generalize about them, but they all "stand on five legs." These organizations are often made up of "independent autonomous circles," which have internal norms and are self-regulating. They are nourished by "catalyst leaders" who transfer ownership and responsibility to various circles and lead by example. All circles share a common vision or ideology, and they eventually find "champion" leaders who are "relentless in promoting a new idea." Catalysts get things started; champions insist that an idea or a product cannot be ignored.

Braffman and Beckstrom give multiple examples of both contemporary and historic starfish organizations. The abolition movement started with decentralized networks of Quakers. Alcoholics Anonymous is made up of largely autonomous yet interconnected circles of people who share a set of principles. So, for that matter, is al-Qaeda.

While Brafman and Beckstrom apply their metaphors mainly to business and political organizations, *The Starfish and the Spider* provides an interesting context for thinking about church life. Consider the history of American denominational structures. From approximately 1607 to 1780, American religion was what we might call predenominational. In the flush of new nationalism after the Revolutionary War, American churches severed formal ties with Europe and set up their own ecclesiastical systems, featuring American bishops, American synods and American principles of religious liberty. Church historian Philip Schaff argued in the 1840s that denominations emerged to manage religious diversity.

Initially, Protestant denominations were confederations or informal networks of local congregations. They had no professional staff and no national services. They existed to cultivate religious leadership for local community needs. Later, as religious diversity increased, denominations enabled groups to preserve distinctive doctrines and unique religious practices. While denominations had the capacity to link like-minded people together, they also split over divisive issues like war and slavery.

By the end of the 19th century, so-called mainline Protestant denominations had become massive organizations structured to support missions, monitor education and serve the wider society. They functioned, according to an early 1990s article on Protestant denominations by Craig Dykstra and James Hudnut-Buemler, as “corporate religious bureaucracies” dedicated to meeting the needs of local congregations. Through Sunday school curricula, missionary collaborations, loans for property development, pension systems, youth programs and social ministries for the aged, denominations played an important supportive role for local congregations. In the early 20th century, denominations stood at the center of Christian life for millions of church members. They were as much like brands as they were like gatherings of like-minded affiliates.

After the 1950s, however, membership in mainline Protestant churches began to decline. Denominational activism around civil rights, feminism and the Vietnam War eroded denominational unity and identity. Dykstra and Hudnut-Buemler noted that since the 1960s denominations had become more and more like regulatory agencies, spending the majority of their energy developing and overseeing regulations in the face of increasingly limited financial and personnel resources. Like oversized and inefficient corporations, denominations are now putting resources into maintaining themselves rather than meeting real needs. Dykstra and Hudnut-Buemler suggested that it was time to do something different. Unfortunately their

call for change has made little difference.

Perhaps the concept of the starfish organization provides a recipe for change. Denominations might imagine new organizational patterns or recognize and cultivate already existing decentralized groups. In truth, churches need not look outside their own organizations for starfish models. The problem is not that such models are nonexistent, but rather that they are often marginalized and belittled by denominational systems.

Take for example the Uniform Series International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching. While you may have never heard of this organization, you have likely been taught by it. This Sunday school curriculum is used all over the world in a truly starfish pattern. It originated in 1872 and has been widely and diversely used ever since. The originating group chose an international lesson committee, and over 125 years later the Uniform Series continues, coordinated through the National Council of Churches. It is an enormously flexible organization that, like the human brain, finds resiliency in decentralization.

Many church organizations rely on loose associations that cultivate skills and services without dictation from above or centralized authority. Some of these are advocacy groups working to influence denominational actions or policies. Some of them offer professional support. Many link together people of similar passion, situation or need.

It may be time for traditional denominations to find a new balance between structure and creativity. What would decentralization mean for denominations? How could denominations build loyalty through networks? While conventional thinking says that big organizations need structure and clear lines of accountability, starfish systems illustrate the power of an element of chaos. Braffman and Beckstrom insist, "Where creativity is valuable, learning to accept chaos is a must."

One way that churches might consider putting the starfish model to work for them is by cultivating more of those leaders that Braffman and Beckstrom call catalysts. These are the people who have a genuine interest in others and who develop networks of connections and map out ways to help. They are often the "drumbeat of decentralized organizations," but they are rarely in charge. Catalysts lead with their emotions, they trust people, they inspire, they tolerate ambiguity, and they know when to get out of the way. Catalysts are not CEOs. They are agents of change,

rather than guardians of tradition. Their purpose is to renew and refresh organizations; decentralized organizations allow them to step forward.

By examining patterns of centralization and decentralization, churches might find a hybrid that works for them. EBay is a company that centralizes some things but decentralizes the customer experience. The rating system develops trust among users, but the centralization of PayPal (through which eBay customers pay for their purchases) allows financial transactions to be conducted safely. Church organizations might ask themselves what modes of centralization and decentralization make the most sense. How can members be empowered and inspired within a shared vision?

Brafman and Beckstrom urge every organization to seek its “sweet spot.” This is a point on the continuum from centralization to decentralization that sustains creativity and change while also protecting the continuity that centralization allows. When Apple developed iTunes and started selling individual songs over the Internet for its iPods, it hit the sweet spot. Individual customers got the music they wanted in a timely and inexpensive manner, and Apple was able to comply with the centralized demands of intellectual property rights. Toyota found its sweet spot in the automobile industry by allowing enough decentralizing for creativity on the production lines, but insisting on sufficient structure to ensure consistency.

In starfish organizations knowledge is shared and spread throughout the system. People want to contribute, especially when they are inspired by ideas. The church does not lack inspiring ideas, but in its denominational life sometimes these ideas get lost or stuck. Brafman and Beckstrom close with these words: “Decentralized organizations appear at first glance to be messy and chaotic. But when we begin to appreciate their full potential, what initially looked like entropy turns out to be one of the most powerful forces the world has seen.” It may be time for denominational structures to revitalize themselves by letting go of their spider habits and becoming more like starfish.