

## Book Review by Malcolm Abel

Title: "The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations"

Author: Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom

Publisher: Portfolio, Penguin Group

Length: 230 pages

Price: \$24.95

Reading Time 3 ½ - 4 ½ hours

Reading rating: 8 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Decentralization has become fundamental in the growth of business in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. A massive revolution is causing a vast shift in the way businesses operate. A spider will die when its head is cut off; a starfish has no head, but cut off its leg and a starfish will grow another.

This book must be read by anyone who thinks they know anything about business. The revolution of information access brought on by the Internet has just begun. But with examples like Napster and Grokster, it will be more easily identifiable and implemented by those who read this book.

The authors make many of their points based upon the comparison of the Spaniard's experience against the Aztecs and the Apaches. The Spaniards were very centralized and Cortes had no problem with killing Montezuma and overcoming the Aztecs. The Spaniards, however, spend over two hundred years, and the Americans almost another one hundred years, at war against the decentralized Apaches.

Now, telling the difference between a starfish from a spider might seem easy enough. The authors, though, felt compelled to elaborate on ten questions to do so. Those questions, such as "Is there a person in charge?" are simple enough, but writing them down helps to understand how they were used to generate the ten rules for the "New World" at the end of the book.

The first set of chapters use historical examples other than Grokster and the Apaches to demonstrate how the ten questions are used to determine the level of centralization or decentralization. The authors also interject a set of principles of decentralization, almost hiding them in the text, which I also found necessary to write down in a list so that I could remember them later.

One of the more interesting principles was "As industries become decentralized, overall profits decrease." This principle leads to several chapters on hybrid organizations and finding the sweet spot, the balance between centralization and decentralization that yields a maximum return on investment.

The best reason for reading this book is to gain an understanding of how to rescue an existing business in the face of the coming vast shift in managing a business. Old business thinking needs to be stimulated in the proposing of new actions necessary to be successful in “New World.” And, it’s also fun to read.

Oh yeah! If you cut off a leg of a spider, it not only will not grow another, but if you cut off enough legs, it will die from a lack of mobility. In some species, not only will a starfish grow another leg if you cut it off, but the leg you cut off will grow another starfish!

Malcolm Abel is a professor of business administration and law in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. His scholarly interests include trademark, marketing, hospitality, and entertainment law. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web site at [www.wcu.edu/cob/reviews](http://www.wcu.edu/cob/reviews).