

The Starfish Community

The world, as you know it, will not exist in 10 years — in fact, it may not exist in five years. Everything is changing. A global shift is occurring with profound changes in how we live, learn, work, and interact. We have struggled for years to build bigger databases with more information that can be accessed at a faster rate. Now we realize that people are the “database,” social networks are the “software”, and we all need a place to plug in.

Humanitarian International Services Group (www.HISG.org), with the assistance of REACT Services (www.reactservices.com) and other groups, is using internet and social networking concepts to evolve from a centralized hierarchical structure to a decentralized starfish-like network called a “Starfish Community.” The goal of this particular community is to connect a global “tribe” who rally to the common cause of liberating the poor (see: www.starfishcommunity.net). But Starfish-like entities are expanding through establishment of internet-based platforms for increased resourcing, communication, and information sharing to create a common picture that all members can use to self-synchronize their efforts. Starfish Communities are about ordinary people making an extraordinary difference by working together and having fun!

The Decentralized Starfish Network



The Starfish and the Spider

Most of us know that a spider is a creature with eight legs coming out of a central body. If you chop off the spider’s head, it dies. It could maybe survive without a leg or two, but it would be permanently disabled. The spider has a centralized control system that is similar to most organizations.

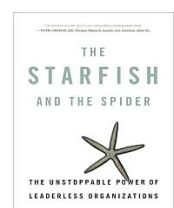


A starfish is similar to a spider in appearance having a bunch of legs coming out of a central body. But that’s where similarities end. The starfish is decentralized and doesn’t have a head. Major organs are replicated throughout each and every leg. If you cut some species into pieces, each piece will regenerate into a whole new starfish. Regeneration is possible because a starfish is a neural network — a network of cells. Instead of having a head like a spider, the starfish functions as a decentralized network. To move a leg, it must convince the other legs that it is a good idea to do so. The leg starts moving, and then, in a process that no one fully understands, the other legs move and cooperate as well. There is no central brain to make a decision.

There are a host of emerging and existing organizations that function in a decentralized manner like the starfish. Examples include Visa, Skype, Craig’s List, Wikipedia, Alcoholics Anonymous and Apache Software, to name a few.

Legs of a Starfish Network

In his book, “*The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations*,” author Ori Brafman, identifies five legs upon which a decentralized network stands. When all legs cooperate and work together, a decentralized network can really take off.



Leg 1 – Circles

Circles are important to provide the vehicle for independent and autonomous operation.

Characteristics of circles include:

- Autonomous groups of 6-12 members
- You connect, you join, you are an equal and do your best to contribute. People commit to what they help create.
- Virtual Circles are larger, but bonding is lower. Real presence creates more ownership and trust.
- Circles are not lawless, they depend on clearly defined values that control behaviors.
- Ordinary people organized into Circles gain immense power.

Leg 2 – The Catalyst

In traditional definitions, a catalyst is any element that initiates a reaction without fusing into that reaction. In a decentralized organization, a Catalyst initiates a reaction, creates momentum by getting it going, and then fades into the background by ceding control to members. Even after leaving, their presence is still felt as they provide inspirational motivation to spur others to action. Characteristics include:

- Develops an idea, shares it, leads by example
- Casual acquaintances fascinate them, they always try to connect people
- Good at navigating complex social networks
- Comfortable at any level of engagement in influential circles
- Have fun meeting and helping new people connect. Always ask “How can I help this person?”
- Mission oriented, not command and control or objective driven

Most Catalysts draw upon similar tools to get the job done including

- Genuine interest in others - No one is boring; everyone is a walking novel
- Loose connections – Establish loose social network with thousands and can socially connect people into the network
- Mapping – Immediately begin mapping new people into the network.
- Emotional Intelligence – Intellectually brilliant, but lead and connect emotionally first
- Trust – Catalysts build trust based on relationship
- Inspiration – Passionate about a big dream and have an ability to inspire action.
- Tolerance for ambiguity – Thrive in ambiguity creating a platform for creativity and innovation.
- Hands-off approach – Once an organization is going, Catalysts have the ability to cede control. People may get frustrated and ask, “What are we supposed to be doing?” This leads people to take charge and have ownership.



Leg 3 – Ideology

Ideology is the glue of decentralized networks. More than a sense of community, or desire to create a better world, it is a common set of beliefs that inspire members to fight and sacrifice for a common cause. These common beliefs define the values of the network, which in turn, dictate the cultural DNA. Since there is no central command and control structure, a clearly defined ideology is central to controlling behaviors. The greater the common cause, and stronger the ideology, the longer the network will last.

Leg 4 – The Pre-Existing Network

Decentralized networks are usually launched from pre-existing platforms. Centralized organizations are not setup to launch decentralized movements. Autonomous circles provide the vehicle to put

people together in a close-knit community of empowered members with shared values, ownership, and a belief that all are equal. Loose knit social networks provide the ideal breeding ground for decentralized circles and have a higher tolerance for ambiguity and innovation. It takes a Catalyst entering the social network to birth a decentralized movement. Today the Internet provides an ideal launch pad for new starfish networks, by enabling rapid and simple communication, and active participation.

Leg 5 – The Champion

Champions are restless pioneers in promoting a new idea. Catalysts are charismatic, but Champions take the necessary steps to move the network forward to the next level. Catalysts inspire and naturally connect people, but there is rarely anything subtle about the Champion.

Characteristics include:

- A natural people person and a good salesman
- Able to draw people in and make them feel comfortable
- People are fascinated by the excitement and charm of the Champion
- Naturally passionate and lively
- Tenacious, will not stop until they have won or are the best at what they do
- Don't do anything half way
- Inherently hyperactive and operate well in non-hierarchical and ambiguous environments
- Act as a salesperson to help people get involved in some type of structure or activity

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 can change the course of history.

Decentralizing a Centralized Organization

With the rise of starfish-like decentralized networks, more common, centralized hierarchical organizations are increasingly faced with a formidable challenge; either decentralize and learn to effectively interface with decentralized networks, or face possible extinction. Whole economies, like the newspaper and telephone industries, are on the brink of extinction by emerging decentralized networks like Craig's List and Skype. How do you know if your organization has centralized or decentralized tendencies? Review these questions provide by Ori Brafman in "The Starfish and the Spider".

1. Is there a person in charge (it is usually one "the buck stops here" leader)?
2. Are there headquarters?
3. Is there a clear division of roles?
4. If you take out a unit or department, will the organization be harmed?
5. Are knowledge and power concentrated or distributed?
6. Is the organization flexible or rigid?
7. Can you count the employees or participants?
8. Are working groups funded by the organization, or are they self-funded?

Ori summarizes the Eight Principles of Decentralization as follows:

1. When attacked, a decentralized organization tends to become even more open and decentralized
2. It is easy to mistake a Starfish for a Spider
3. An open system does not have central intelligence; it is spread throughout the system
4. Open systems can easily mutate
5. The decentralized organization sneaks up on you (because it mutates so quickly)

6. As industries become decentralized, overall profits decrease – that is why you want to watch out for them before they take an industry by storm
7. Put people into an open system and they will automatically want to contribute
8. When attacked, centralized organizations tend to become even more centralized

One of the greatest challenges in decentralizing a centralized organization is that of financial sustainability. As an organization decentralizes, overall profits decrease. Decentralized organizations must be innovative in developing financial income streams.

In addition, in the 21st Century world of partnering, strategic alliances and collaboration, it seems as though the more decentralized an organization is, the more friendly they seem to be in effective cooperation and joint action.

Of course, many effective organizations, networks or communities are hybrids of the Starfish and the Spider with some centralized decision making on certain aspects of their work. The key question is whether these entities are moving toward more centralization (and control), or less?

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