

Why should the Constellation strive to become a fractal Starfish?

Q: I have heard a little about this Starfish concept. Where does this term come from?

A: The Starfish concept comes from a Management book called: "The Starfish and the Spider" of Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom (2008). The book argues that organizations fall into two categories: traditional 'spiders', which have a rigid hierarchy and top-down leadership, and revolutionary 'starfish' which rely on the power or peer relationships. They use this concept to explain the great success of the Apaches tribe, eBay, General Electric, Toyota, Al Qaeda, Wikipedia and Anonymous Alcoholics.

Q: OK, sounds like another management book on explaining success of certain companies. So, how can this 'Starfish' concept explain success of such a diversity of organizations?

A: They're all decentralized organizations that have bedeviled the established hierarchy. Toyota leveraged starfish principles to crush their spider-like rivals, GM and Ford. Tiny Napster crippled the global music industry. The free, community based Wikipedia crushed Encyclopedia Britannica overnight. Al Qaeda flourishes and even grows stronger. The common denominator is the decentralisation concepts that each of them used to grow stronger very quickly. At the same time, it is about the open-source revolution, a trend that is simultaneously dismantling many established industries while harnessing the creativity of the masses to generate new ones.

Q: OK, so in what sense are 'Starfish' really different from 'Spiders'?

A: Starfish organizations are decentralised. There is no clear leader giving commands, no hierarchy, no headquarters. If a leader emerges, that person has little power over others. Everyone is entitled to make his or her own decisions.

Q: So a Starfish is an anarchy?

A: No, there are rules and norms, but these aren't enforced by any one person. They simply exist and people like to use them. Think of it as SALT in our way of working. We don't really punish somebody if he is not appreciative, but somehow people adopt it all around the world.

Q: OK, so why do they use the name 'Starfish' to explain all this?

A: Well, Starfish have an incredible quality to them. Cut off the leg of a spider, and you have a seven-legged creature on your hands; cut off its head and you have a dead spider. But cut off the arm of a starfish and it will grow a new one. Not only that, but the severed arm can grow an entirely new body. Starfish can achieve this feat because, unlike spiders, they are decentralized; every major organ is replicated across each arm. Get this: for the starfish to move, one of the arms must convince the other arms that it's a good idea to do so. The arm starts moving, and then the other arms cooperate and move as well. The brain doesn't 'yea' or 'nay' the decision. There is no central command.

Q: All right, thanks for the Biology class. So how all this links to the Constellation?

A: Well, Starfish also tend to organize around a shared ideology or a simple platform for communication- like al Qaeda or Alcoholics Anonymous. They arise rapidly around the simplest ideas or platforms. Ideas or platforms that can be easily duplicated. Once they arrive they can be massively disruptive and are here to stay, for good or bad. And the Internet can help them flourish.

Q: So that's where you see the link with spreading AIDS Competence faster than the virus?

A: Exactly!

Q: So what's the best example now in the world that we can 'compare' us to?

A: Well, the Alcoholic Anonymous is the best-known Starfish in the world. In 1935 Bill Wilson had to stop drinking or he would die. Experts were of no help for him. They were well-meaning, but none had a cure for alcoholism. As soon as someone told him what to do, Bill would rationalize

away the advice and pick up a drink instead. It was on this point that the breakthrough came. He realized that he could get help from other people with the same predicament. AA was born. No one's in charge at AA. You automatically become part of the leadership if you join and thus, AA is constantly changing form as new members come in. There are thousands of AA circles and chapters around the world. The one thing that does remain constant is the recovery principle – the famous 12 steps and some manual called: The Big Book. There is no application form, and nobody owns AA.

Q: Wow, this looks like what we are starting to do....So how did they grow so much?

A: Well, people from all over the world wanted to start their own chapters. Bill had a crucial decision to make: Go with the spider approach, manage the brand, train applicants etc. or go for the Starfish scenario and simply move out of the way. He decided to let go of control and trusted each chapter to do what it thought was right. Now everybody can start a chapter and members can help each other without getting permission or approval from Bill. And it's now grown so much that it probably saved more people from alcoholism than all expert-advice together.

Q: Interesting story. Now tell me more about what principles underpin this Starfish model like AA, Wikipedia or Al Quada?

A: Well, the Starfish is built around certain principles. Think of it as observations on how they normally develop. The key principles are the following:

1. When attacked, a decentralized organization tends to become even more open and decentralized. If Spiders want to 'take down Starfish', this becomes impossible. Imagine, UNAIDS or some institution or government wants to stop our approach (not very realistic). With a true Starfish structure, this becomes impossible as our system will only get more open and 'viral'. You can't stop communities from applying SALT and Self-Assessment if it's driven by themselves and shared naturally.
2. It's easy to mistake a starfish for a spider. Outside organizations might think: This ACP is just another 'participatory' community approach driven by some headquarters or some 'flag-planting' organization. However, they might be mistaken. Our vision of growth would follow more natural structures with little control from the CFT.
3. An open system doesn't have central intelligence; the intelligence is spread throughout the system. It is clear that the CFT does not have all the answers for AIDS Competence in the world. The knowledge is local.
4. The decentralized organization sneaks up on you. Because Starfish mutate so quickly, it can grow incredibly quickly. Spiders weave their webs over long periods of time, slowly amassing resources and becoming more centralized. To achieve our vision, we have to grow quickly which is easier in the 'Starfish' way. If we choose to grow the 'Spider' way, it would take years before our own resources would grow so much, so that we can establish real subsidiaries and offices in other countries.
5. Put people into an open system and they'll automatically want to contribute. Wikipedia is the best example. People feel proud and it's rewarding to contribute to Wikipedia. The surprising thing is that the contributions often are really accurate and (low-cost) peer-reviews keep the quality high. For us, Ning is a good example. It only launched 5 months ago and now has 253 members, 103 blog postings, a flourishing community and only small stimuli from the CFT to post. We have to continue building this community and keeping it open without 'policy force'. Don't forget that the success of Wikipedia took lots of time and learning from earlier versions (Nupedia). Ning only gets started....
6. Open systems can easily mutate. Take AA again. No one knows how many chapters there are or how many members. It's flexible, equal and constantly mutating. Chapters simply take the principles and models and fly with it. This is much like the Constellation's business model. This is also where our 'fractal' model comes into play. We have more than 4 years of experience which we can share with the new chapters. Chapters can use this (although adapt in different

ways as well). By the way, like with AA, our chapters are not limited to 'countries', 'groups', or any demographic factors. Everybody can start an 'AIDS Competence' chapter if they want to.

Q: Hmm, interesting. Tell me a bit more about this fractal thinking. That word reminds me of a Broccoli....

A: Well, the Constellation's CFT was the first of the starfish and has over 4 years of experience. Growing like a Starfish can be by through mutation in a similar organized way. In a fractal organisation, the whole structure and its elements have the same shape. Like a cauliflower. Each piece of the cauliflower has the same shape as the whole integrated cauliflower. You can read more when clicking [this link](#).

Q: So that would mean that each element of the overall organization is organized in a similar way?

A: Yes, with of course some bandwidth. Ownership (also of structure) needs to be cherished all the way. A fractal approach also greatly enhances opportunities to share and learn from each other. For example, the Facilitator, Transfer in Indonesia can easily share with the Facilitator, Transfer in Congo.

Q: But this can only work if the chapters really share a same vision, mission and values. If people start doing other things (like service delivery), this wouldn't work?

A: You're right. Because we try to let structure follow function, naturally these 'best structures' would emerge from the different elements. This is not a structure cast in stone, but develops over time.

Q: OK, so what's the structure that emerged from the functions of the CFT over the last years?

A: Well, each team has 3 main functions: (i) Transfer the approach (ii) Learn how to better transfer the approach and (iii) Share the enthusiasm and results with others. Membership care is integrated in each of these functions. At the founding meeting of PNG AIDS Competence, the members all said: 'yes, that makes sense!' when sharing the structure of the CFT.

Q: Any more learning from the CFT that is useful for establishing a new chapter?

A: We learned quite some things when establishing the organization. For example,

- We had a common vision
- we knew each other and had worked together
- We took risks
- We were clear on what we would do and not do
- We had an great trust capital: we had self confidence that we could do it as a team
- We invested our own time and money
- We started with basic equipment
- AEP at Chiang Mai University served as a wonderful host

Q: Yes, I can imagine you need this to start-up a new chapter. And how are you working now? I mean, what are the everyday principles in the CFT at the moment?

A: Well, besides the happiness of employees, the main principles are:

- We continue the dialogue on vision and mission
- We practice within what we preach for the others (SALT)
- We go for the low hanging fruits, so opportunities that have a high probability
- We sell our services, not depending on any single source of funding
- We keep spending to a bare minimum
- We constantly interact using IT free communication tools (Skype, Mikogo, ...)
- We have Single Points of Reference for each partnership/project
- We try keep everybody informed

Q: OK, this is useful. So growing like a fractal Starfish might be our dream. Where are we now? I mean, what are the practices that lead us to an effective Starfish?

A: Good question! Well, there 10 practices leading to 'Starfish Competence'. Let's quickly go over them and you can think of which level we are from 1 to 5 OK?

Q: OK, bring it on!

A: For clarity, I compare the practices with the Spider model. So think of the Starfish concepts as 'level 5'.

Q: Are you saying that the Constellation is striving to get to level 5 on each of these practices?

A: No, not really. The conclusion of the book is to 'find your own sweetspot'. For every organization, some hybrid form of a Starfish is the best. The Constellation needs to see where on the spectrum we should be. So some practices might be more important than others. Which ones do you think are most important?

Spider	Starfish
There is someone in charge	There is no one in charge. People give suggestions, not orders
There are headquarters	There are no headquarters.
If you thump it on the head, it dies	If you thump it on the head, it survives
There is a clear division of roles. Departments are fixed and stricts.	There's an amorphous division of roles. Anybody can do anything.
If you take out a unit, the organization is harmed	If you take out a unit, the organization is unharmed
Knowledge and power are concentrated	Knowledge and power are distributed
The organization is rigid and depends on structure	The organization is flexible
Units are funded by the organization	Units are self-funded. There is no central well of money.
You can count the participants	You cannot count the participants
Working groups communicate through intermediaries	Working groups communicate with each other directly. No roads lead to Rome, because there isn't a Rome.

Q: Hmmm, most of the practices seems surprisingly applicable. However, on some we're not level 5 for sure. For example, what happens if we now take out the CFT?

A: yes, of course we are still in the initial growth phase. But all of the practices make clear sense for our business model at the moment to some extent. And again, we don't have to strive for level 5 on each practice. This serves as inspiration.

Q: OK, I see what you mean. So what does all this imply for the Constellation? I mean, give me some direct actions we can take based upon this Starfish model.

A: OK, these are just some of my (=Gaston) thoughts arising from direct examples in the book. I just want to stir the discussion. This is not exhaustive, nor cast in stone. See it as a first brainstorm. What do you think of these implications?

- a. Maintain a culture of trust and follow the consensus.
- b. Building a strong community around strong values and trust is critical for growing exponentially

- c. Keep our 'software' completely open-source. Anyone who wants to download any of the tools and suggest alterations, should be free to do this
- d. On Knowledge Assets, keep the adding and updating process easy and quick. Review process should not be too cumbersome. Try to trust the community.
- e. Remain appreciative about contributions. People contribute because they get a feeling of rewarding.
- f. Don't rely on a 'policy force' for our (online) community. It will inhibit creativity.
- g. Make sure members (or coaches) meet physically from time to time. It adds a dimension of closeness and ownership.
- h. Don't set rules, but rely on norms (also on Ning)
- i. Continue being a 'midwife'. Transfer ownership and responsibility to the chapters as much as possible.
- j. Keep paying attention to our ideology and values like SALT. It's the glue that holds decentralized organizations together.
- k. For quick growth of community, we could use pre-existing networks that are built around similar values, ideology. Building a brand-new decentralized organization is tough. So let's try to tap into existing platform or movements. Just make sure they are decentralized as well!
- l. The ideology or values need to be simple and easy to transfer. We have to keep on simplifying our process and approach to spread exponentially.
- m. Values are a stronger binding force than authority. Let's keep it that way. Let's keep on being SALTy all the way.
- n. Mobilizing people works best through sharing of inspirational stories. Let's continue this share strategy.
- o. In the field (like with the AA), continue expressing the belief in human capacity and focus on hope. Look for strengths.
- p. The AA had a 'Big Book' with its ideology and all the steps. Bill first wanted to sell them or copyright them. This failed once chapters started translating them, copying them and distributing them. Eventually, they dropped all property rights. I think this is also our way to go for the suitcase, manuals or any tools.
- q. As a CFT, let's not earn too much money. This is the danger Wikipedia faces now. The system works better when it's underfunded and almost everybody is a volunteer.
- r.
- s.

Q: OK, this makes sense. It seems we are already going the right direction. May I summarize my thoughts after this conversation in a few lines?

By focusing on a decentralized system with no headquarters or central knowledge, The Constellation can grow much faster and bigger with a small need for central funding. It requires a strong community based on trust, a common ideology and norms instead of rules. The experiences from the CFT on how to set up chapters can accelerate the growing process and inspire new chapters, so we even can become a fractal Starfish. CFT can also play a connecting role for members to interact directly. CFT remains small with limited funds and let's go of strict control of chapters. Knowledge on AIDS Competence is build locally through a contribution system that is intrinsically rewarding.

A: Wow, you're a fast learner! Also see below a graphical representation of our business model.

