



The Dominant Species Is Not The Strongest, The Swiftest or The Largest (Interview)

Steve Denning | Contributor, Forbes

One of the most memorable journeys that I made as an executive of the World Bank was accompanying the World Bank president to the Serengeti region in Tanzania. The region, which hosts the largest mammal migration in the world and is considered one of the ten natural travel wonders of the world, is an amazing spectacle, with lions, elephants, crocodiles and flamingos, all living in their native habitat.

I was therefore fascinated to come across Stefan Swanepoel's new book, *Surviving Your Serengeti: 7 Skills to Master Business and Life*, which discusses the parallels between the perils that animals face in the Serengeti, and what managers face in business today. I talked with Stefan recently about his new book.

You ran a New York based global franchise network with 25,000 sales associates in 30 countries. Your book is about an African safari. What do these two worlds have in common?

The vast expanse of the African jungle is a great representation of the larger global business world and a safari offers a unique window into the very essence of life; millions of animals on a migration and millions of people on a journey through life. The similarities are uncanny and the skills required countless times in the lives of the animals facing survival on a daily basis echo the skills we all require surviving in our man-made concrete jungle.

The title of your book is *Surviving the Serengeti: 7 Skills to Master Business & Life*, which seems to imply that the business world is like the Serengeti in Africa, i.e. a dangerous place full of wild animals and hidden pitfalls. Is that how you see the business world? If so, why?

In many regards; yes. For most of us enduring in the world of business is usually a complex survival struggle as well.

For both there are many pitfalls, threats and considerations that influence success. In nature it may be hunger, thirst, predation or seasonality that impact survival – in the urban jungle it may be a shortage of capital, a lack of resources, competitors or an ever-changing economy that we have to deal with. Companies and individuals that are not constantly aware of their surroundings and the potential threats they contain will face a business death – loss of income, be acquired or perhaps even experience bankruptcy.

Yet for those that are able to master their skills and learn how to develop them, they will find that the business world is always brimming with opportunities through which they can thrive.

The title could also be seen as implying that the world is so dangerous that even survival is a triumph. Do you think it's possible, not merely to survive, but to thrive and flourish in today's business world?

But of course; nature illustrates that very vividly. For example, on the Serengeti the dominant species isn't the strongest, the swiftest or even the largest. Over the centuries the animal that has been able to thrive the most, despite being hunted by lions, cheetahs and crocodiles, is the wildebeest.

The wildebeest is similar to our bison. Certainly unbecoming in appearance they are non-aggressive herbivores. Yet they have become the dominant specie on the Serengeti, shaping the entire landscape. Most animals, including the king of the jungle, adjust their lives, eating patterns, breeding, etc. all around the wildebeest. Their annual 1,000-mile migration run across dangerous savannahs in which they continually face predators like the cheetah and hyena as well as crossing roaring rivers filled with voracious crocodiles blocking their path. It is a journey that is widely regarded as the #1 natural wonder of the world.

It's their individual and collective tenacity and endurance that continually drives them forward. Although many wildebeest die every year on their pilgrimage, the specie as a whole thrives and at 1.5 million strong is by far the most dominant of any of the over 70 large mammals in East Africa.

Endurance is inspiring to see whilst also very humbling when you realize that as humans we often fail because we give up too easily. For me, endurance is not only the foundation of survival; it is a key component of success.

Your book argues that a variety of skills are needed to survive and that knowing what our dominant skill is can help us cope with the dangers we face. What is your own dominant skill and how do you use this knowledge to survive and flourish?

Initially I thought I was a wildebeest, maybe it was the expectation because I admire its enduring proficiency so much. However, the "What Animal Am I?" quiz identified me as a strategic lion – a result I might add, with which my entire family wholeheartedly agrees.

On the vast expanse of the Serengeti where most animals can outrun the lion, failure to plan will cause the even the king of the jungle go hungry and subsequently die of starvation. The lion needs to strategize every day on how it is going to acquire its next meal.

In the massive vastness of a global economy it's no different. Failure to strategize will cause even the largest and soundest company to stumble, lose market share and potentially be absorbed by a competitor. So, wherever you find yourself, a well-thought out plan is an essential roadmap in achieving a desired goal.

This is your 20th book but your first business fable. What led you to write a fable?

One should write what you read and read what you enjoy. I love fables.

Parables I believe are a great way to explain concepts and have them remembered. The more appropriate the metaphor, the easier it is to share and the more enjoyable the learning experience; the more unforgettable the message becomes.

The epic landscape of the Serengeti migration is a perfect canvas to share the critical skills from which we all, irrespective of the stage of our career, can benefit.

To what extent is your book based on real life?

Surviving Your Serengeti is truly a fable and is not an autobiography. That said, I lived for three decades in Africa, including South Africa and Kenya, one of the two countries that is home to the vast Serengeti eco-system.

During these many years in Africa I developed strong and deep feelings for the wildlife. After being on over 15 safaris there is no doubt that animals have become very dear to me. However, hidden within the beauty of nature are also the harsh realities of life and death; they go hand-in-hand.

Nature in general and the Serengeti in particular offer a unique perspective into the very essence of life itself. It is a larger-than-life metaphor for the problems, sorrows and struggles we as humans experience. It reveals the primordial secrets for overcoming adversity, conquering one's fear and ultimately triumphing over any and all of life's challenges.

Do you use your animal analogies in your business life? What effect do they have?

Yes, I do. Life in many respects resembles a safari, a journey. Although we are not animals we are certainly similar and have our basic abilities and needs.

Most people have multiple skills and use many different abilities during the course of their life, often even in one day. However, irrespective of how many abilities we may possess, we can only have one dominant skill. Therefore, that implies that there will always be someone else better at something than we are. That's why we need other people with other skills.

On the grassy savannahs no one can outrun the cheetah. In the river no one is more dominant than the crocodile. The one is efficient and effective, the other enterprising and confident; neither is better than the other but both are focused on surviving and thriving.

Surviving Your Serengeti doesn't attempt to be a comprehensive skill analyzer, rather an easy and exciting way of determining which of your skills is dominant. As most of us can easily relate to animals it's a fun platform for discussions and team building.

Take the short, three-minute online quiz at www.WhatAnimalAmI.com and discover the animal in you.

What advice would you give your readers in using your animal analogies in their organizations?

See life as a safari of self-discovery. Know yourself and understand the innate skill that makes you who you are.

You already have what it takes to be successful; you don't need to be someone or something else. Determine the strengths of the people around you, those you report to, those who report to you, those on

your team and those you serve. Together we can help each other to master and maximize our respective skills.

About the Author: Stefan Swanepoel recently penned the *New York Times* Best Seller *Surviving Your Serengeti – 7 Skills to Master Business and Life* (www.SerengetiBook.com). He is the author of 19 other books and reports including the highly acclaimed annual *Swanepoel TRENDS Report*. He has delivered over 800 talks to 400,000+ people in nine countries.