

Why You Should Eat a Live Frog Every Day

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This business leadership case study provides perspectives on the success of two iconic American companies: the Sheraton Hotels & Resorts chain and Perdue Farms Inc. In particular, this case study focuses on the personal and professional principles of two business leaders involved in the successful development of these two companies.

INTRODUCTION

This story begins when my father, Ernest Henderson, started the Sheraton Hotels. His brother, his roommate from college, and he pooled their war bonuses from serving in World War I and used the \$1,000 to form the Sheraton corporation. Sheraton employed 20,000 people at the time of my father's death.

This story also involves my late husband, Frank Perdue. Frank started in the chicken industry with his father. At the time of his death in 2005, Perdue Farms employed 20,000 people and sold poultry and grain in more than 50 countries.

To achieve this kind of success, Henderson and Perdue regularly followed three principles. These principles played an important role in their success, and these principles are memorialized in this discussion.

The first principle is described next.

EAT A LIVE FROG EVERY DAY

“Eating a Live Frog” is a metaphor for doing the tough things and doing them without delay. The idea comes from Mark Twain, who pointed out that if your job requires you to eat a live frog every day, eat that frog the first thing you do and get it over with. And if your job requires you to eat two live frogs every day, eat the bigger one first.

The thing is, people who are winners do the hard things first. They do not procrastinate, and they do not spend their time “sharpening pencils.” They just

plunge in and do what needs to be done, even when it is really, really hard.

Both men made a career out of doing the difficult things. In fact, both my father and Frank Perdue had to eat a large colony of live frogs during their lives.

The story of their entire careers was that, over and over again, they had to transform themselves to learn the skills that they needed. These were tough, difficult skills, ones that were not congenial or natural. However, if they had not learned these skills, they would not have achieved the success they did.

One of the first tasks that both men had to accomplish is: they were both, to the end of their days, abnormally shy people. To have a career in the public, they needed to transcend their shyness.

Ernest Henderson started out being pathologically shy. He either had Asperger's or was close to it. I know this from observing him. I also know it because an objective test he took showed just how shy and diffident he was.

When my father was in his late 20s, he could not figure out what he wanted to do with his life. He would try one thing and then another, and nothing seemed like an answer.

In fact, changing from one thing to another was so characteristic of him that when he and my mother got engaged, Grandmother Henderson took my mother aside for an important conversation. It was 1923 and they were sitting in the parlor of the family home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.



“Don’t marry Ernest,” Grandma Berta warned my mother, “He’ll never stick to anything and you’ll end up poor!”

My father clearly knew he had a problem. He recognized that he had a big live frog to eat. The year he got married, he did something that feels like an act out of desperation on his part. He went to the phonebook to find a career guidance counselor and found the Johnson O’Conner Aptitude Testing Service.

He made an appointment and arrived at the Beacon Street office in Boston’s Back Bay. To help my father understand why he could not stick to anything, and to help him assess what kind of work he was suited for, Johnson O’Conner asked my father a battery of questions.

One of these was word associations. I no longer remember the words my father told me about, but I clearly remember the gist of how it was supposed to go. Let’s suppose it was you taking the test back then. It would proceed something like this:

Counselor: “Tell me the first word that comes into your head when I say the word ‘red.’”

You: “Blue.”

Counselor: “Hot!”

You: “Cold.”

Counselor: “Inside!”

You: “Outside.”

These responses would be normal, but my father’s responses to these association questions seemed to come from a different planet. The word “red” would make him think of a fingernail. “Hot” made him think of a windowpane. “Inside” made him think of a box of crayons.

At the end of a hundred or so of these word associations, the guidance counselor warned him that the kind of person who had such unusual associations with words would have great difficulty communicating with others or even understanding them. He told my father that he was such an extreme that, in O’Connor’s entire career, he had never come across an individual who had such completely subjective, as opposed to objective, responses.

As my father told the story, O’Connor recommended to my father that he was best suited to working in a laboratory, by himself, where he would not have to interact with other people.

However, my dear father did not become a scientist. He ended up the polar opposite of a lonely scientist in a laboratory. Instead, he became one of the industry leaders in the hospitality industry. In his career, he was a genial host to so many people all over the world, that I think only a national politician would regularly interact with so many people.

So, the big question here is, how did my father, who was innately a shy, socially inept person make it in the hospitality industry?

He studied what he needed to learn to be a gracious host! He took the Dale Carnegie course and he read and re-read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. He told me he would re-read it at least every 10 years.

He used his scientific bent (he had a degree from MIT in electrical engineering) to study what made people agreeable and nice to be around. He also took several public speaking courses, figuring that knowing how to communicate was essential for the career path he had chosen.

In the end, his greatest weakness—relating to people—became one of his greatest strengths. He got there by doing the difficult things, by each day working on transforming himself.

Interestingly, my husband Frank Perdue had an almost identical experience. You may know of him as a marketing icon, someone who was so successful at branding a commodity that he changed the whole profession of sales and marketing. And yet, in the early 1940s, he was so shy that when his father wanted him to sell feed grain, Frank could not look a prospect in the eye. Instead, Frank would shuffle from foot to foot, while staring at his field boots.

Like my father, Frank fought against his shyness so successfully that I suspect few people would guess it. However, I have several reasons for knowing that this is true.

First, I often heard him talk about his shyness. Next, I also observed it myself countless times. Finally, and perhaps most objectively convincing, I saw the results of a personality test that he once took that confirmed it.

The personality test came about because a university researcher, possibly from the Perdue School of Business, wanted to uncover some of the personality traits that made Frank a success. Since Frank was not known for introspection, I was surprised when Frank agreed to take the test.

It was 1995, and we each sat at the oak dining room table in our family room, and spent an hour with our separate tests, answering the forced choice questions with our pencils. The test, by the way, resembled the Meyers-Briggs test, but it was not actually associated with Meyers-Briggs.

Frank did not enjoy it, but he gamely went through each question, methodically marking off the answers and being a good sport about it. Since we were both taking it, I was as curious as can be as to what the results would reveal.

When the results came back, I saw that of the 25 or so parameters that were tested, Frank and I had similar scores. They showed what percentile we scored with regard to various characteristics such as honesty, punctuality, conscientiousness, perseverance, and so on.

Frank's scores were invariably higher than mine. But my scores always went up and down the same way that his scores did. If you had made a graph of our scores, the patterns, if not the actual scores, were identical. Except there was one glaring exception to all this—an area in which we were extreme opposites.

It had to do with what does and does not energize a person. The questions revealed whether you are energized by social interaction, or on the contrary, do social interactions “cost” you. In other words, does socializing require significant effort on your part?

My score in this dimension was in the top 5 percent. Frank's score was in the bottom 5 percent.

I get totally energized by interacting with people. In a large party, or if I am speaking in front of a large audience, I am in my element. I have the infinitely enjoyable feeling of “This is what I was born for!” Socializing is about as natural and essential to me as breathing. In fact, Frank used to say about me, with perfect accuracy, that I would rather give a speech than eat. I think all this came from being raised in the hospitality industry.

Frank's personality was the opposite of this. As an only child raised on a farm in the country, socializing did not “come natural,” to use an Eastern

Shore expression. For him, even to the end of his days, socializing was something that (even though he enjoyed it), drained him.

And yet he deliberately fought against this deficiency. He transcended himself. He became more than he was born with.

The thing is, Frank could see the importance of social skills and simply made himself not only learn them, but practice them. In the end, he perfected them. Today, I think almost anyone would agree that Frank Perdue became world class at just about every aspect of socializing.

But remember, he did not start out like that. Remember, he was the guy who, in a sales situation, could only awkwardly stare at his feet.

Like my father, Frank took the Dale Carnegie course. He simply made a study of how to become more outgoing.

For example, when he was first asked by the advertising company's copywriter, Ed McCabe, to appear in the chicken ads, Frank's first answer was, “No! Don't even think about it. I've never even been in a school play.”

However, McCabe convinced him that he had to. McCabe told him, “Whatever you say about your chickens, your competitors can copy you! The one thing they can't copy is, you look like a chicken, and your voice reminds people of a chicken. You are the one part they can't copy.”

Frank did not want to be in the ads, but he was also charmingly self-aware and knew that he looked like a chicken and sounded like a chicken and that he squawked a lot. He had no trouble joking about this, and McCabe was able to convince Frank that Frank's “chicken-ness” was an advertising advantage.

But now came a great big live frog for Frank to deal with. How does an extremely shy person convert himself into a television pitchman?

Frank spent weeks and weeks going over his 90-second lines. I would be surprised if he did not practice his 90 seconds of lines at least several thousand times. He would practice them in front of his family at the breakfast table and after dinner. And there would be hours spent in the living room, saying the lines over and over again in front of his daughters.

When the day arrived for the shoot, he made his way to the local park in Salisbury, Maryland, with its quaint white bridge in the background. He sat down at a tan-colored picnic tablecloth, held a chicken drumstick in his hand, and proceeded to tell Ed McCabe, “I don't want to do it! I can't do it! I can't even remember the lines!”

In other words, it was uncomfortable as anything in the world for this shy, introverted man to be staring at the video camera, mounted on its tripod, with the videographer counting down with his fingers, “Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Rolling!”

Live frog time for Frank!

Still, he forced himself to deliver his lines, “A chicken is what it eats! And my chickens eat better than people do! I store my own grain, fix my own feed . . . if you want to eat as well as my chickens, you’ll just have to eat my chickens!”

And then a funny thing happened: he had practiced his lines so often and knew the material so well that when he looked into the camera, he was not just reciting lines. Rather, he was looking into the camera, speaking from the heart about what he knew to be true.

If you watch the Frank Perdue videos—and you can find them on YouTube—you will hear a sincerity to his voice, a from-the-heart truthfulness in his tone, and cadence. Watching the ad, you would see and feel this. He was utterly, utterly believable.

Viewers felt this. In the end, this unusually shy man became a sensation on TV. His advertising campaign, “It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken” became the iconic ad of the 1980s, and it catapulted his company from a small, regional organization to the top tier of all chicken companies.

His willingness to advertise a commodity did not just change the chicken industry; it had an impact on countless other commodities as well.

However, keep in mind that he did it by transcending his limitations.

Which brings me to another part of Frank’s limitations, one that also involved eating still more colonies of live frogs. Frank had learned how to “give” to the camera and to come across as likeable and believable on TV. But there was an additional handicap to overcome.

If he was to be a spokesperson for his brand—and by the way, he was the first major CEO ever to do this—he would need to learn how to overcome the handicap of being socially shy and awkward. He practiced learning how to overcome this drawback, using an almost Olympic level focus.

Like my father, Frank read books, sought advice, and, as I have mentioned before, not only read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, he also took the Dale Carnegie Course. Like my father, Frank was forever working on cracking the code of how to get along with people.

Frank used to share with me some of his approaches to this.

“Don’t talk with people about our overseas trip or the fancy parties we’ve attended,” he would coach me. “Your goal is to make the other person feel important. Making people feel important is the goal, not impressing them with what you’ve done.”

My husband would also coach me on the value of being self-deprecating. “It’s much more attractive to make yourself less important,” he would say, “because it lays the ground for them to feel more important.”

Frank would also tell me, “People don’t care so much about who you are as about how you make them feel.” He understood the great psychiatrist Williams James, who said 100 years ago, “The deepest principal in human nature is the craving to feel appreciated.” Focusing on them instead of on oneself was key to having a positive social interaction.

The social skills Frank developed, and his understanding of human nature, seemed to me to be boundless. As an example, I used to watch in awe when I would see him at a large gathering of people, when, for example, we would be supporting a charity.

Imagine for a moment that you are accompanying him at, let’s say, a United Way function. (That, by the way, was a charity he adored.) For starters, if the event was to start at 6:00 pm, you and he would be there at 5:58 pm.

You would be standing inside the room, maybe 30 feet from the door. You and Frank are positioned there so you have a chance to have an interaction with everyone as they enter the room.

Typically, each contact would be brief, but you, in your role of observing Frank, would notice that in each case, as Frank greeted someone, he was looking this individual in the eye, shaking his or her hand, and for a moment, focusing his attention on the person so completely, enveloping the person in his caring so totally, that the individual was almost certainly feeling at that moment like the most important person in Frank’s world.

In truth, at that moment, that person was the most important person in Frank’s world.

A couple of hours later, at the end of an event, you and Frank have shaken hands with everyone in the room. And, you would be in the unique position to know that this did not happen by accident. Frank had planned it by positioning himself near the entrance.

Frank was so insightful, going about it this way. Remember, businessmen typically go to big important events for networking and to be seen supporting whatever cause they are there for. However, after they have invested the time and the money to be there, how many of them accomplish

their networking and visibility goals as thoughtfully and as efficiently as Frank did?

Frank had gone to the effort to learn how to accomplish his networking and visibility goals. He had not left it to chance.

Frank's social skills at events were always a bravura performance, and those skills weren't limited to big social events. I often meet people even today who remember a brief contact with Frank: a secretary in an office where Frank was visiting her boss and took the time to be pleasant and make her feel important; or a taxi driver who for the rest of his life remembered the pleasure of having Frank Perdue talk with him about the cab driver's work, family, and life; or a server at a restaurant who remembered Frank treating him with the dignity of an equal.

We have been talking about how both men continuously ate the live frog of overcoming extreme shyness in order to develop the social skills they needed for their work. But that is not the end of the live frogs that came their way.

The second principle each man followed is described next.

TO BE AN INNOVATOR, BE AN INFORMAVORE

Both men were extreme "informavores." That is a made-up word, and I think I made it up, but maybe others thought of it first. Just as carnivore consumes meat, an informavore consumes information.

By endlessly accumulating knowledge on amazingly different subjects, Henderson and Perdue were able to see connections that were invisible to others. They each attributed much of their success to being willing to see things in new ways. That, in its way, is also a live frog. That is because it takes a huge effort to see things with fresh eyes.

Where did their ability to be innovative come from? It came, at least in part, from being willing to go way out of their way to absorb new information. Both men were advocates of the notion that "one good idea can change your life."

I have a favorite story of the lengths my father would go. One day in the 1950s, he drove from Boston to a small town in upstate New Hampshire to



hear a lecture on business. I knew it was a 10-hour round trip journey, traveling on crummy roads, and in those days the maps were not great. In other words, it took him a lot of effort.

I found out later that the people who attended the lecture, included the owner of a local gas station and a small-town grocery store. And, here was the president of a national hotel chain that employed nearly 20,000 people attending this meeting.

When he returned home, I noticed he was carrying a pad of notes, and he was smiling. I thought it was incongruous that he would put the effort into attending a lecture that, to his 12-year-old daughter, seemed inconsequential.

"Why did you go?" I asked him. "These are not the VIP people you could be hanging out with!" I will never forget his answer. He looked at me, and said in a serious voice, that I remember to this day, "If you can get one good idea, wherever you find it, it can change your life."

Although he was the founder and head of a New York Stock Exchange-listed company, one that was on its way to becoming a billion-dollar-a-year business, he was not above hanging out with mom and pop business owners. As he told me, this was because "having access to good ideas gives me a leg up on the competition!"

Frank matched my father when it comes to being an informavore. He was always reading. The topics that interested him were diverse. He knew enough about Empress Catherine the Great to have a lively discussion about her with the Librarian of Congress. He was fascinated about the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge. You would not believe how much

he knew about the race horse Sea Biscuit, or treasure hunting, or military history, or the latest John Grisham novel.

When a subject interested Frank, he would dive into it. I remember he read so much about Alexander Hamilton, that when we visited the Hamilton Museum on Nevis Island where Hamilton was born, something amazing happened. The docent, after maybe 10 minutes of showing us around, stopped telling Frank and me about Hamilton. Instead, as we walked through the exhibit, looking at the artifacts and posters, it turned out that Frank knew so much about each of them, that the docent spent the next hour asking Frank about Hamilton! It was as if she were the tourist and Frank the docent.

Frank was like that. His mind was crammed with extraordinary amounts of information.

Frank drew inspiration from reading, attending lectures, hanging out with other business persons, and generally doing exactly what my father did—he put himself in the way of getting good ideas.

In the case of both men, they went way out of their way to get good ideas.

The diet for an informavore is summarized below:

1. Read everything—it does not have to be disciplined reading; in fact, it is better if it is not, because you never know where you will find a good idea
2. Attend lectures every chance you get
3. Haunt the Internet
4. Take classes
5. Go to conventions
6. Join associations
7. Network with people, who can give you ideas
8. Set up Google alerts on a topic
9. Sign up for newsletters
10. Listen to podcasts
11. Join a Mastermind Group

The third principle is described next.

BE ACTIVE AND AGILE

Part of the philosophy of “eating a live frog” is procrastination is against the rules. If there is a live frog that needs eating, do it without delay!

Both my father and husband had a huge propensity for action. Action meant having tremendous agility. I remember one night in the very early

1950s, my father told my mother and my siblings over dinner, “We’re getting into the credit card business!”

He told us that there was this new entity, Diner’s Club, and it was issuing credit cards. Father reasoned, that with a national hotel chain and a database of tens of thousands of clients, Sheraton could rapidly get into this attractive new business.

He told us that night, “We thought about getting into it this morning, and we started working on it this afternoon!”

In fact, he and his business partner Bob Moore, rolled out the Sheraton Credit Card in a matter of weeks. “We can make decisions and put them into effect much faster than our competitors,” my father told me when I asked him to tell me more about it. He went on to say that he was pretty sure it would take his competitors months, if not years, to make and implement such a decision.

This agility proved profitable. He and Moore created a large, fully functional credit card system. A few years later, Sheraton was able to sell that system to another credit card company for a fortune.

I got to learn more than you might expect about credit cards. My first job at the age 15 was as a file clerk for the Sheraton credit card division of my father’s business. I and eight other file clerks sat in a small office with shoe-box-size containers filled with alphabetized credit cards.

There were thousands of boxes, and our job each day was to match credit cards with lists of people who had not paid their bills. In these cases, our job was to remove the cards and record the credit card number. People at the front desks of the hotels were given a list of the credit card numbers that were not credit worthy, and they were asked to reject those credit cards.

But we also knew who paid promptly and who spent a lot. The number on an individual’s credit card was a special code, and certain numbers would reveal to the front desk people that they were dealing with someone who was a VIP. Other numbers would reveal such things as, “This person is a very, very important person because he or she is someone who can book conventions!”

I was impressed that my father could come up with, in such a short period of time, an elaborate plan for vetting credit cards. It meant that when they sold the credit card division, the cards had a lot of value. After a couple of years, we knew a lot about the spending habits and reliability of each card holder.

The credit card example was emblematic of his approach to business. He told me that being able to respond rapidly and with agility—either

to opportunities or to problems—gave him a huge advantage over competitors.

He also told me that part of his success came from being the first to introduce innovations. Some examples: he was the first to introduce air conditioning in a hotel chain; he was the first to have bathroom scales, and he was the first to introduce the pull-out strings you could use to hang your socks over the bathtub. He came up with that last idea because it was something he wanted for himself and figured out that others would want it also.

In the case of air conditioning back in the early 1950s, I asked why he went to the enormous expense of paying for this innovation. His answer was, he was sure that the demand for comfort would be available everywhere soon. That meant, at some point, he would have to pay for it to remain competitive.

However, there is a lot of advertising and word-of-mouth value to being first. So, if you are going to have to spend the same money either way, why not be the first and get the benefit from it? After all, you do not win a lot of points by advertising, “Look at us! We were third to introduce air conditioning!”

His attitude was that doing 90 percent of what is required is one of the biggest wastes. This is because you have nothing to show for all your efforts. Doing 110 percent of what is expected (which I take to be the equivalent of eating a live frog), is one of the smartest investments. This is because for just a little more effort, it can pay off with a great reputation and more clients.

Frank Perdue was equally someone who loved action. I mentioned above that he pioneered advertising as a commodity. But he was also a pioneer in bird genetics (breeding a broader-breasted chicken) and in transportation (in order to ensure on-time deliveries, he went into the trucking business and today we are one of the largest trucking and transportation companies).

Since he wanted to control the quality of feed for his chickens, he got into the grain business. Today, roughly half of the income of Perdue Farms comes from grain and oilseeds.

Chickens eat the soybean meal, but there is 300 million pounds of soybean oil not used by Perdue Farms for raising chickens. Some of the innovative ways the oil is used include Little Debbie snacks, Frito Lay chips, and Stauffer cookies.

In explaining his approach of being both innovative and action-oriented, Frank loved to quote the story of an old sea captain who told his son, “My competition copies everything I do, but they can’t copy my mind and I leave ‘em huffing and puffing a mile and a half behind.”

For Frank, the agility that resulted from research and development and the ability to put ideas into action were the magic keys to leaving competitors “huffing and puffing a mile and a half behind.”

Both men had a huge propensity to action. They might be willing to put immense amounts of research and study into something, but they weren’t afraid to commit and “pull the trigger.” Their careers were characterized by *action*.

“Doing 110 percent of what is expected . . . is one of the smartest investments.”

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

My father and Frank started out as shy men with zero experience in big business. My grandfather was an academic. And Frank’s father’s background was small-scale farming. To prosper, my father and Frank needed to grow not just horizontally in the skill sets they used, but also vertically, where they transformed themselves from shy, introverted young men to people who were comfortable on an international stage.

They did this by transforming themselves. They were each unusually shy men who learned to become charismatic public figures. They did the hard things.

They did it by becoming informavores. Because of broad interests and a huge databank of experience and knowledge, they were able to put together ideas and see opportunities that were invisible to others.

They did it by being agile. They made a habit of putting ideas into effect far more rapidly than their competitors. They loved action.

These techniques are available to you and to the people you advise. Encourage people to be brave enough to transcend their limitations, to explore the broadest range of interests, and to have a propensity for action.

This, of course, takes effort and it means doing uncongenial things. It means a diet of eating live frogs.

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