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'Reformed' CEO offers guidance to other execs

By Al Lewis

Denver Post Business Editor



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Brian Gast recalls his CEO days as a period of semi-consciousness.

His stint at American Telecasting Inc., a wireless TV company in Colorado Springs, made him a multimillionaire at 29. He went on to run another wireless company, Formus Communications. Then an Internet access company, Jato Communications.

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"Most of those stretches, I was not very awake," says Gast, 43. "I was just so consumed with my business success. ... Building my tower. ... Accumulating financial notches in the gun. ... I didn't realize how out-of-balance my life had gotten."

He raised millions from financial markets, racing from one meeting to the next, frequently slamming a martini or three.

"I was really abusive to my body in a lot of ways - always running."

Gast, the son of a Presbyterian minister, lost touch with his roots. The more money he made, the more he compromised his values. He sought validation outside of himself. Relationships suffered. Happiness was elusive, though he was too preoccupied to notice.

His companies piled up debts to grab market share in an era that promised to reward first-movers. He had many successes, but none of his enterprises survive today.

He's been hired. He's been fired. He's built companies and watched them fall. Jato, for one, was forced into bankruptcy. Gast says

has learned from these experiences. He says he has reformed. He is, perhaps, a recovering CEO.

As the economy collapsed, Gast studied Eastern religions. He shaved his head and learned Zen meditation, though he clings to a traditional Christian faith. He eats mostly organic foods now. He imbibes almost zero alcohol. He has traded pin stripes for jeans.

As part of his spiritual journey, Gast took counseling courses and now gives advice to other CEOs. His new company, Quadrant International Inc., offers executive coaching programs, costing up to \$15,000 for senior executives and up to \$7,500 for mid-level managers. Clients say he's worth it.

Bob Grubb was a division head of Singapore-based contract manufacturing giant Flextronics and now runs several companies from Niwot. He hired Gast to help him break free from ineffective behavioral patterns.

There are few to whom a CEO can turn, Grubb says. CEOs are beholden to so many constituencies: Customers wanting lower prices and higher quality, investors demanding constant stock appreciation and board members who always are second-guessing.

"It's great to be able to unpack big issues with a fellow CEO who is trained as a counselor, who can help me look at my problems from different angles," Grubb says.

Denver entrepreneur Ed Barbera hired Gast to help balance his values, his business

and his family commitments.

"He's an intelligent and intuitive individual with tremendous business experience," says Barbera, who has run wholesale distributorships and a telecom startup.

Gast says he offers a path to self-awareness from which true behavioral changes can bloom.

"I try to make them aware of their shadow, their hidden drivers, so they can be conscious and awake when they are making decisions. So they can have a clear understanding of what makes them do the things they do."

Alex Burney of Denver-based Huge Hosting sees Gast in a group of other young executives. They talk about integrity, caring for employees, not sacrificing long-term viability for short-term gains, and balance in life.

"How you are in other aspects of your life is how you are in business," Burney says. "Brian is reaching out to those of us in our 20s and 30s, so we don't turn out to be the next Bernie Ebbers."

"It's a calling," Gast says. "It's what God put out there for me."

Al Lewis' column appears Sundays, Tuesdays and Fridays. He can be reached at alewis@denverpost.com.