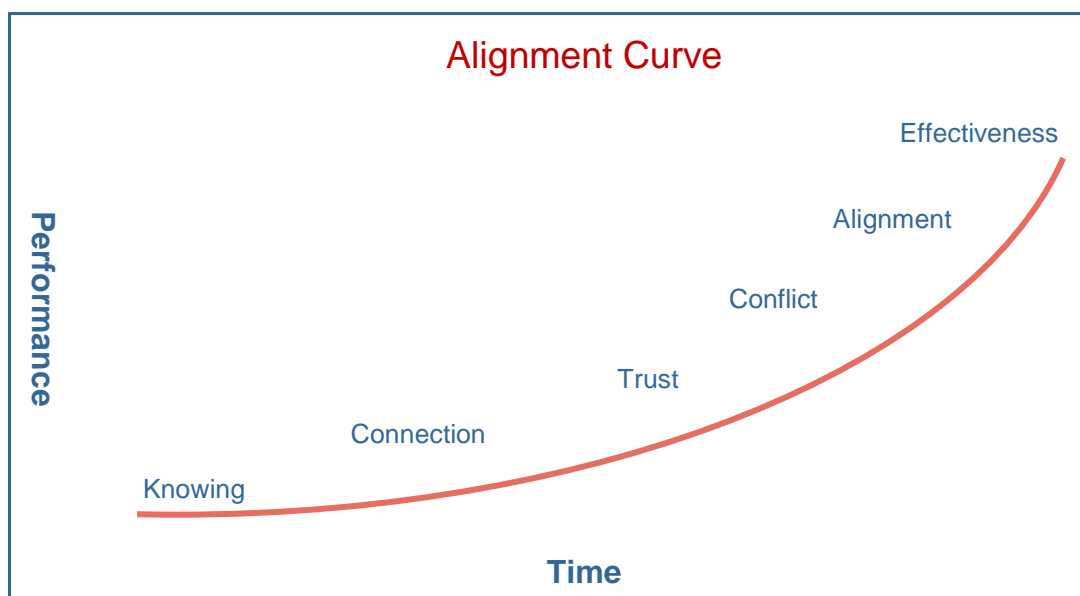


# **Top Team Alignment Process: How to Improve Your Team's Connection, Trust and Effectiveness**

By Brian Gast, President of Quadrant Corp

Leaders of executive teams hire coaches because their team is underperforming compared to its competition or potential. If results don't improve after I work with them, I'm not invited back. Yet to improve results I don't focus on the results, I focus on getting the team connected and aligned. *Connection* is a fundamental need shared by all humans and *alignment* occurs when all team members are focused on a common set of principles, priorities and outcomes. Great results and effectiveness in the marketplace and high performance are byproducts of healthy, high-functioning relationships more than the results of team members having relatively high intelligence and experience. By healthy relationships, I don't mean they are necessarily friendly or social. I mean there is direct communication, people's need for connection is met, and there is trust among team members.

If team alignment is the guiding principle and high-performing results are the expected byproduct, where do we start when assessing and improving a team's performance? I have developed what I call the Top Team Alignment Process (TTAP) to enhance team performance by improving connection and increasing trust among team members. The TTAP is based on a universal dynamic that occurs as groups evolve into aligned teams. This dynamic is graphically depicted as the Alignment Curve. The Alignment Curve serves as a road map to guide teams through the alignment process. Graph 1 depicts the curve that illustrates how performance improves over time as a team evolves through six stages of alignment.



Graph 1

Each stage of the alignment process naturally leads to the subsequent stage. Teams don't move through all these stages and remain perpetually aligned. Events occur that shatter or erode trust, new members are added and old ones leave, and changes outside the team create new conflicts. In such cases, a team has to revisit various stages of the curve. Additionally, not all team members are at the same stage at all times. Team members can use the curve to determine their team's stage of development and the areas that need more focus.

Each stage is illustrated using the output of an actual client experience. At the end of each stage, I have included a "Now You Do It" exercise, which describes the steps you can take if you want to use this process with your team.

## **The Alignment Curve in Action**

I had coached Frank, the western division president of a national distribution company, for about a year. In our work together Frank made a lot of positive changes in the way he communicated with his team. He addressed conflict more directly and significantly decreased his level of micromanaging. He invested in building stronger relationships with many members with which he had weak connections.

In spite of Frank's increased self-awareness and improved communication skills, his team was struggling. Team members exhibited a pattern of passive-aggressive behavior. Rather than debate issues in team meetings, team members would seemingly agree to an initiative or new process, then do whatever they wanted after leaving the meeting. The meetings contained little conflict, and all meaningful communication between members happened off-line in sub-groups, outside of formal gatherings. Though members said they were in agreement, there was little alignment.

Another issue that surfaced is a surprisingly typical one. Three of the newest members of the team who had been on the team for nearly a year had yet to be integrated with the team. The new players' response to resistance from old-timers was to stay on the outside of the team. Their attitude was, "Fine, if you guys don't want to welcome us in we'll stay outside and do what we want." The fifteen- to twenty-five-year veterans figured the new members needed more time to prove themselves and conform before accepting them as

part of the team. The veterans were so entrenched that they could and would block any meaningful attempt at change being proposed by the new people.

This pattern got *expensive*. The team had high turnover. New “change agents” were hired and left when it became clear their ideas were not going to be accepted. New players began to understand that either they complied with “the way we do things around here” or left. As an alternative to leaving, the new team members took advantage of the fact that they were not integrated in the team by the others. They used their status as outsiders to avoid accountability or conformity.

Frank knew he was facing multiple, well-entrenched dynamics that were limiting the performance of the team and costing the company money each time a team member was turned over. Frank realized he was too close to the team to address its issues. After interviewing all members of the team, I planned a two-day off-site meeting and coached Frank on what patterns he had to break in order to stop enabling dysfunctional team member behaviors. I referred to the Alignment Curve to develop processes that would help the team mature by seeing its performance-draining patterns, build trust and commit to new communication norms.

Each stage of the TTAP is described below. I also include a model that improves communication and helps teams move through the stages more rapidly. The stage descriptions highlight the principles at play at each stage. The specific processes or exercises a facilitator uses for each stage varies based on the personality of the team and the facilitator’s style.

## ***The Stages of Alignment***

### **Stage One: Knowing**

The first stage of alignment is what I call Knowing. This name refers to the process of people getting to know one another. With breakneck pacing and the majority of interactions in business occurring over e-mail and phone there is little time to get to know fellow teammates. I know this sounds much too simple, but the old adage of “slowing down in order to speed up” applies perfectly here. To become aligned, teams need to slow down enough to exchange more of their personal stories.

After introducing the concept of the Alignment Curve, Frank's team began its off-site by sharing personal stories. Although they initially asked themselves how these "soft and fuzzy" exercises related to business, the team members jumped in telling stories about what it was like growing up and how they would spend a year-long paid sabbatical. In the process, they were developing valuable communication skills and seeing the value of expressing emotion, going just 10 percent outside their comfort zone in terms of personal disclosure, and listening intently to one another. By doing these exercises, the team members were developing communication "muscles" that could be used in any interpersonal situation, whether with team members or total strangers. As they told their stories, they revealed their core values and what they cared about most. As a result, they began to see each other as fellow human beings instead of just co-workers. They experienced each other's vulnerability and naturally became more empathetic and less judgmental of each other.

The participants in the off-site learned the skill and importance of communicating more openly and understood the limitations of communicating at the surface. To navigate through all the stages of the TTAP they learned about what I call the Four Levels of Truth. Understanding this model is a vital first step in any team alignment process for it sets up agreed upon communication norms that will serve the team as they strive to increase trust and discuss sensitive issues.

Moving to higher levels of connection involves personal disclosure; it's all about being vulnerable. Vulnerability comes with personal disclosure because there is a risk that someone may use what you share to hurt you or that when you express yourself authentically that someone will reject and disconnect from you leaving the most fundamental human need of connection unmet. Expressing this "deeper truth" about ourselves means sharing our emotions and the core values we aspire to or needs we are trying to meet that are driving our behavior. This type of disclosure is contrasted with sharing our opinions and beliefs or, worse yet, our criticism and complaints. Table 1 defines the Four Levels of Truth. Understanding these levels guides us toward more disclosure that allows us to let another know us better. We can also use it ask questions that bring another person to higher levels of disclosure. Simply asking, "And how did you feel when that happened?" or "What is really valuable to you in this situation?" fuels any alignment process.

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**Four Levels of Truth**

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Level #1: My Thoughts and Judgments	My explanations, judgments, logic, complaints, rationalizing, “victim” statements, projections, generalizations, “we all...,” excuses, demands, cocktail party talk, “stories.”
Level #2: My Personal Beliefs	What I choose to believe.
Level #3: My Emotional Truth	How I feel (i.e., mad, glad, sad, scared or guilty).
Level #4: My Core Needs	What I care most about: my values and core needs.

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Table 1

When we express at deeper levels people connect with us, they trust us even before we’ve had the time or opportunity to demonstrate we are trustworthy. In the process of sharing at a deeper level everyone on the team can meet his or her core need of connection—this alone will fundamentally enhance team performance. When we share our deeper truth we create the emotional and psychological safety needed to surface and resolve conflict. When we know the value of candid and direct communication that occurs when we share our emotions and personal needs, why is communication in the workplace so often superficial and indirect?

The answer: being truthful takes work. Sharing our deeper truth with another requires us to move outside our comfort zone. Truth is not an intellectual or moral concept or saying the “right thing.” Truth is sharing our hearts, sharing what is alive inside us emotionally and what is triggering those emotions. Being truthful means expressing at Level Four: telling a person about the core need you are trying to meet in a given situation. Examples of core values include: certainty, trust, connection, contributing, meaning, affirmation, and respect.

Team and organizational performance is limited by members’ resistance to or fear of greater candor and personal communication. Shallow communication reduces trust and leads to inefficiency. You may be reading this and thinking, “This kind of communication isn’t going to fly in my company’s culture; it’s not practical.” I agree that the application of all

communication tools needs to pass an “ecological test” to see how they fit in certain environments. Start by testing communication at Level Two or Three. See what others are ready to hear and what happens to your ability to make connections with others when you disclose to others more of your internal thoughts and feelings. Trust your instincts in using the Four Levels of Truth as a guide to connect and inspire and don’t rationalize your way to staying at the surface.

Frank’s team used the Four Levels of Truth to stop making global statements and generalizations like, “We all have to make tough decisions,” and use more vulnerable and true “I” statements like, “I made a tough call because I believe it was the right thing to do for the client,” and “I felt a little nervous after I made that decision because it is important to me that you respect me.” The “I” statements are more vulnerable and personal and allow others to continue to get to know you. This foundational and often counterintuitive method of communicating sets the TTAP in motion and the team quickly finds itself in the next stage of alignment.

### **Now You Do It**

As the team is getting to know each other better, it is helpful to create guidelines for communication. This has the effect of focusing and deepening conversations and creating increased emotional or psychological safety. Establish these basic Communication Guidelines for your team's session. Add other guidelines you think will serve your team's personality and situation. Hand these out in written form or place on a flip chart. Discuss them. Clarify as needed, and ask each member to agree to abide by them.

1. I agree to tell the truth.
2. In the event I am sharing an opinion or judgment, versus data or fact, I will qualify my statement as such. For example, "My judgment is . . ."
3. I agree to express myself in a way that is 10% outside of my comfort zone.
4. I will not speak in generalizations. I will use "I" statements and share my own experience.
5. I will express my emotions and take responsibility for my emotions.
6. I will respect confidentiality.
7. I will ask for what I want from others.
8. I will address conflict as it arises, take responsibility for my part, and have empathy for the needs of others.
9. Once the team makes a decision, I will support it 100 percent.

After a discussion about the goals of the session, ask one or more of the following Icebreaker questions:

1. If you had a one year paid sabbatical from which you could return to your current job how would you spend that year?
2. Describe a time of great pain in your life.
3. Describe what brings you joy in your life.
4. Describe the greatest challenge of your childhood.

### **Stage Two: Connection**

The need to connect with other people is what I call the cornerstone to all human needs. Yet in business it is often ignored. After all, this is business and we have work to get done right? Teams and leaders that ignore this need starve people of a basic hunger of life and remove one of the core reasons people work together.



Then there are the ways we cut ourselves off from deeper connection by having only superficial conversation. We deprive each other of connection because we are worried we won't measure up or that we are truly acceptable material to others. Behavior, thoughts and feelings that are fed by a belief that we are inherently unworthy drains the life force from individual contributors, team leaders and the entire team.

The process and stage of Connection flows naturally from Knowing because in the Knowing stage team members are communicating at the Third and Fourth Levels of Truth, which requires people to take a risk and be vulnerable and, in doing so, to see the commonality in each other. Telling part of our personal story reveals our humanness and something about us that everyone can relate to. When I know how you feel and what you care about most deeply, my fear that you won't accept me melts away. By being vulnerable, we have taken a risk to invest in one another. The more I know about you the more ways I can find to connect.

In order to create a stronger connection, Frank's team did an exercise that looked at how team members related to one another. The team created a human "sculpture" or constellation of the team with each member taking on the position and posture Frank thought represented the way they behaved in the context of the team. The process encouraged every team member to speak about his or her level of commitment to the team and who they trusted most and least. Once this truthful dialogue started, the level of trust among team members increased dramatically and weak connections among team members could begin to be strengthened. As we share more and listen more we begin to see the interconnection that exists among everyone.

### **Now You Do It**

With everyone standing in a circle, ask for a volunteer to start the exercise. (The person won't know what he or she is volunteering for, but this helps loosen up the group and lets you to see who the risk-takers are.) Ask the person to complete the following sentence: "The greatest benefit I get from being a member of this team is . . ." The person who answers gets to pick who goes next until everyone has spoken.

Repeat the process by asking the next volunteer to complete the following sentence: "My greatest frustration with this team is . . ."

### **Stage Three: Trust**

Trust emerges once team members become connected through their shared vulnerability. Trust increases when team members risk revealing more about themselves. When we become vulnerable, it invites others to do the same and we all have “skin in the game.”

Building trust takes risk and time and can quickly evaporate if someone takes advantage of what they know about another. I encourage teams to expect that such breakdowns will occur. Whether it’s conscious or not, there will be times that people who work closely together will say or do things that hurt one another. Because we trust each other doesn’t mean we won’t hurt each other. Trust means that there’s a foundation upon which our relationship has been built. It means we share a commitment to working through the hurt or other emotions that inevitably arise in a relationship. When trust exists not only can we successfully work through hurt, we can use our breakdowns to deepen our connection.

To lay a foundation of trust for Frank’s team, we began talking about the value of a “feedback-rich” culture and how this had to start at the senior team level. I set up the next team exercise by declaring that as helpful as 360-degree feedback surveys are, they are designed for wimps. They are anonymous, indirect and, in most cases, don’t contain very deep levels of truth. These surveys do little to stimulate on-going feedback among team members. With their agreement, I had the team members each develop a set of strengths and weaknesses of themselves and their fellow team members.

We had done the work to create safety and a layer of trust in the team and therefore were ready to exchange feedback. We applied two principles that make feedback useful. First, it had to be about specific, observable behavior and not include any judgments of why team members were doing what they were doing. Second, it had to be balanced between critical and affirming. With these norms in place each member took a turn in the “hot seat” while their teammates provided feedback. As an example, Joe told Ellen that “I appreciate the way you consistently deliver projects on time and it doesn’t work for me when you cite what you say are company rules such as . . .” There were some uncomfortable moments giving and getting feedback, yet they trusted the process and took risks with one another. More disclosure led to more trust, which led to truth-telling, which led ultimately to alignment.

### **Now You Do It**

I call this a feedback or “hot seat” process. You can set it up to include some fun as well as use it as an opportunity to communicate feedback or observation about a fellow teammate; perhaps on behavior that causes you confusion or difficulty. Set up the seating with one empty chair at the open end of a horseshoe-shaped seating arrangement for all team members.

Members have 10 to 20 minutes to make notes on one trait, pattern or behavior that they appreciate about each of their fellow teammates and one trait, pattern or behavior that doesn't work for them (causes some difficulty). The fun can come in the form of guessing what type of music or talk radio the person listens to on the way to work, or what the person keeps in the trunk of his or her car

Each member takes a turn in the “hot seat,” remaining silent and receiving the feedback with an expression of gratitude after the last person speaks. The person then tells the group what he or she listens to on the radio and keeps in his or her trunk.

After everyone has had a turn in the hot seat the group can debrief the exercise by sharing how it felt to deliver and receive feedback and what, if anything they will do with it.

### **Stage Four: Conflict**

With some degree of trust and connection formed, the team needed to get more skilled and comfortable with handling conflict. Engaging in conflict is a skill. When conflict occurs in a way that is useful, it leads to deeper levels of trust, connection, and knowing each other. Healthy conflict invites us into a vulnerable place of disclosure and discovery of what is real, alive and important to each other. Connection, trust and empathy for each other will not exist without the expressing of our deeper truth.

In the case of Frank's team, each team member was able to express the judgments and unresolved conflicts that were keeping him or her from being more committed. This process also resolved the problem of the team members who were on the outside and had, up to that point, failed to integrate. When they finished the “hot seat” process of sharing feedback with each other, the team no longer was divided into sub-groups of “newbies” and “old

timers.” In fact, the team members weren’t sure if long tenure was a liability or asset and finally decided it could be both.

To facilitate the “clean” and productive resolution of conflict, I introduced a model and process for surfacing and resolving conflict. This process uses four steps that leverage the Four Levels of Truth Model and encourage personal disclosure and empathy to resolve conflict. Although I won’t go into a detailed description of each step, I have listed them below. These steps are based on Marshall Rosenberg’s *Non-Violent Communication Model*.

**Step One:** Make Observations Not Judgments

**Step Two:** Express How You Feel

**Step Three:** Communicate the Unmet Need or Value That Creates the Feeling

**Step Four:** Make a Clear Request of the Other Person

Several team members took the floor to work through the four steps and build or rebuild relationships with other team members. Because they had moved through the preceding stages of the TTAP, the team efficiently tackled the unresolved conflicts that represented the biggest energy drains for the team. As they processed the conflicts between individual members, connections went deeper, trust higher, and commitment to each other and their team decisions increased.

High-performing leaders build truth-filled cultures that are comfortable with fighting, conflict, and disagreement. They know this promotes alignment but, more importantly, it fosters accountability. Team members know they will be called on breaking commitments and breaches of personal integrity.

The presence of conflict tells me there is safety to express new and controversial ideas. This safe environment is what allows a team to be creative. Creativity and innovation (not just incremental improvement but discontinuous change) comes from the fringe, the usually marginalized or even disowned part of the organization or team. If a team can’t handle conflict well, the voices of team members who sometimes sit at the margin of the team will not be heard. Innovative teams dedicate themselves to surfacing and eradicating their dysfunctions via healthy conflict in order to have all voices heard.

Through the creation and nurturing of a feedback-rich environment where truth flows upward and across the team, teams realize Alignment and move to Stage Five.

### **Now You Do It**

If you have completed the first three stages, conflict will flow quickly and with few personal attacks. You may start this section of the session by saying, "I am opening the floor for anyone to share anything that he or she wants with the group. Especially relevant is anything that is a distraction or an "elephant" in the room. This is also a time to surface and address any conflict you have with another member of the team or if you or you feel someone else has broken an agreement with you and it has not been resolved to your satisfaction."

You can then write the four steps described above and remind everyone about the Communication Guidelines they agreed to adhere to. The four steps (Facts, Feelings, Unmet Needs, and Request) are guide to make the expression efficient and at a Deeper Truth level. Anyone on the receiving end of a conflict is asked to listen without comment until the person raising the issue is finished. It is good to repeat back the concern raised to make sure it has been understood correctly and that the person expressing the conflict has spoken at the Deeper Truth level.

### **Stage Five: Alignment**

High-performing leaders recognize it's critical for teams and organizations to experience conflict and its accompanying chaos in order to build consensus and buy-in to new directions. In the absence of conflict, or when conflict remains unprocessed, the dissenters or those feeling disenfranchised give lip service to their agreement while they churn inside. When it comes to execution, these people either put in minimal effort or sabotage the work the team agreed to do.

Alignment doesn't mean that everyone on the team agrees that a given direction is the best one. What's important is that people feel their ideas and concerns and objections were heard. If the majority of the team members agree on a direction, the minority will usually support it but only if they have had their need to be heard met. When teams conflict skillfully, they can adopt a norm that says, "Once we make a decision, there is solidarity among team members."

By day two of the TTAP, Frank's team was able to identify and change its dysfunctional communication dynamics and become aligned. Because they were aligned and had tools to stay aligned, it was remarkable how quickly and creatively the team worked through even complex business issues. Among other progress, in less than forty-five minutes they developed a plan to increase productivity in their delivery processes. Part of the progress was due to one team member dropping his resistance to a valuable idea he had blocked for months. In the past he said, "This can't be done because we will never . . ." This time he disclosed some of his fear and core needs, which invited empathy from fellow team members and new strategies to address his concerns.

Like meat falling off a well-cooked bone, all the groundwork of the prior day was paying off when it came to attacking and solving business dilemmas. At this point, I knew the team was ready to execute. Like most teams, had this team been left to its own processes, they would have launched into the business issues as soon as they arrived at their off-site. The result would have been a group instead of a team, no alignment, sub-optimal solutions, little creativity, inefficient communication, and about a 20 percent chance that anything they decided to do would actually be implemented.

### **Now You Do It**

At this stage of the process you are ready to move into action on a live business issue. Begin this section with a question and capture answers on a flip chart or have people write their answers on a Post-It note and collect them and put them on the flip chart. The question is: "If this team were to work on something important and urgent, what would it be?" You will collect hot topics, see what is on team members' minds, and prioritize how you will spend your time in a working session.

This approach is better than the leader or most vocal member bringing the topic to the team that he or she wants to address. Allow the hot topic to emerge and allow team members to collectively commit to the important issues.

## Stage Six: Effectiveness

After their alignment session, the participants didn't leave with a manual. Instead, they went home with a new set of relationships. They knew they were part of a team that functioned differently than the ones they compete against. They left having made agreements to do things differently every day. Most importantly, they left with new beliefs about each other and themselves. They had clear action items with specific dates associated with them. Quarterly follow-up one-day team meetings were scheduled in order to keep the team aligned. They agreed to add monthly, three-hour strategic meetings and cut their weekly staff meetings to an hour during which they would focus only strategic topics. The monthly strategy meetings gave the team time to brainstorm, process conflicts, give feedback and fully express concerns about new initiatives. The weekly meetings became focused and productive.

The western division of my client company is generating the highest operating results among its peers in the company. Turnover at the top team level is practically non-existent. The western division team leaders have introduced team alignment communication norms and exercises to other cross-divisional teams in order to eliminate dysfunctions in these committees and task forces. All of these exceptional results began with a team getting connected and aligned.

### **Now You Do It**

During your team's strategic meetings (versus update meetings or tactical meetings) but no less than monthly, start the meeting off with a short ice breaker, or what I call a "check-in," that allows team members to express what is occupying their thoughts or keeping them up at night.

Remind the team about the communication norms. Open up the floor for conflict clearings. Use the clearings to hold each other accountable for broken agreements or standards of performance that are slipping and, equally important, recognize strong performance, risk taking and effective behavior.

### ***A Final Note about Team Transformation***

Mediocre teams never seem to have the time to meet, people show up late or not at all, their meetings are uninspiring and unproductive, and off-sites are dreaded. These so-called teams can be filled with talented and experienced players but they are not aligned and are often at odds with each other. World-class teams, on the other hand, share a vision for team success and place this above individual results. Their members are invested in each other and there is connection and trust.

The TTAP does not work if the team composition is flawed. When one or more team members is in the wrong role, lacks the skills necessary to do his or her job, fails to develop strong communication skills as described above, or is highly self-centered or self-deceived, either individual coaching or the shedding of certain members is necessary in order to move to the next level of alignment. I've also found that once a team embarks on the TTAP, members who don't want to be accountable or be part of a team leave the team.

When teams are comprised of members who have high self-awareness, however, the trust, safety and commitment to excellence you feel when you are with them is palpable. I'm not suggesting these teams are passing around a stuffed animal as a talking stick. Quite the contrary, they can handle conflict, chaos and the hard truth because they have done the individual and collective work necessary to build trust. They are able to see one another as individuals all trying to meet universal human needs.

The Top Team Alignment Process transforms a group of people into a team, a team dedicated as much to the *way* they do things as to what they do. In this kind of team, members look forward to the times they spend together and are inspired by the results that emerge when they stay focused on what keeps them aligned.



## About the Author

Brian Gast launched Quadrant Corp in 2001 after meeting other corporate leaders like himself who were looking for something more than the typical weekend or week-long training workshops. Quadrant provides individual coaching and team facilitation to clients who range from those on the Fortune 1000—such as Roche Pharmaceuticals, Cisco Systems Inc., Clear Channel Communications Inc., Covidien, and The Walt Disney Company—to mid-sized, regional companies.



Through its relationship with YPO-WPO (previously Young Presidents' Organization), an organization for men and women who find themselves in the position of president or CEO before the age of 40, Quadrant works with high-achieving mid-life executives navigating personal and professional transitions.

Before founding Quadrant, Brian helped co-found a publicly traded telecom services company. He was CEO of this company for more than seven years. After this success, he went on to co-found and lead two other companies. Yet it is from his failures that Brian learned most and from which he discovered the key to happiness and effectiveness. From these experiences, Brian created a unique multi-step transformational process that he uses with teams and individuals.

Brian now dedicates his life to bridging the gap between the world of personal growth and the highly demanding professional world business leaders live in today. In total, he has worked for over 20 years in executive positions in a number of companies and studied leadership for over 30 years.

## Learn more . . .

To learn more about Quadrant's Top Team Alignment Process, its executive coaching programs and its staff of skilled and experienced Associate Coaches visit [www.briangast.com](http://www.briangast.com). If you would like to speak directly with Brian, call (303) 707-1340 or email him at [brian@briangast.com](mailto:brian@briangast.com).