



CEO Interview Series

Brian Raffel, co-founder and former CEO of RavenSoft

In our CEO Interview Series, **Park Square Executive Search** engages with founders and CEOs about their experiences building and evolving leadership teams across major inflection points in their companies' growth. In this installment, Bob Huseby and Sean Cantarella of Park Square speak with **Brian Raffel**, co-founder and longtime CEO of **Raven Software**, the Madison, Wisconsin-based studio behind iconic franchises including *Quake*, *Soldier of Fortune*, and *Call of Duty: Warzone*.

Brian Raffel

Co-Founder & CEO

Raven Software (Activision)



Bob Huseby (Park Square): *Take us back to the beginning. You and your brother Steve started Raven Software in 1990 with no business experience. How did you approach team building then?*

Brian Raffel: Steve and I were the entire company for the first couple of years. We were based in Madison, Wisconsin, and knew a lot of talented artists in the area who had worked for DC, Marvel, and other comic book publishers. In the beginning, hiring was driven almost entirely by word of mouth, friends referring friends. More often than not, it worked out, and some of those early hires stayed with us for decades. Our first official employee was an artist who had worked as a Marvel comic book artist. The interview process was minimal, he came to the door, we looked at his portfolio, and we said, “Okay, you’ve got the job.”

The realization that recruiting needed to become a structured process came gradually. However, the real inflection point came with the Activision acquisition in 1997. Suddenly, we had access to resources, financial tools, and HR infrastructure we had never had before, and that was when we started getting serious about building a true hiring process.

Sean Cantarella (Park Square): *How did the Activision acquisition come about?*

Brian: Steve and I made the deliberate decision to put Raven on the market because we understood how fragile game development could be. One bad game could have ended the company, and we wanted to control our destiny rather than wait for industry consolidation to force our hand. We ultimately met with six different companies and chose Activision. Just as importantly, Activision made a commitment no other company did, they promised Raven could maintain its own identity and culture rather than simply be absorbed into the business.

Sean: *As CEO, how did your role evolve as Raven scaled?*

Brian: I stepped away from game development around 2001 or 2002 and fully committed myself to running the business. That transition was prompted in part by my brother, who pointed out I was unintentionally biased in how I allocated resources because I was also leading game projects. From that point forward, my role shifted from creating games to becoming an agent of organizational change. I focused on bringing in consultants, speakers, training programs, and new processes to help Raven evolve into a more professional and scalable organization.

Along the way, I developed a leadership framework I called AAA: Authority, Autonomy, and Accountability. My philosophy was to get out of talented people's way and let them do what they do best. I wanted leaders to have the authority to make decisions and the autonomy to execute without unnecessary oversight. At the same time, autonomy doesn't eliminate accountability, when challenges arose, I expected people to take ownership and arrive with a proposed solution, not just a problem. My job wasn't to make every decision but to help people think through decisions and support them in executing successfully.

Bob: *What did the years after the acquisition look like?*

Brian: The biggest lesson for me after becoming part of Activision was the value of resources. With greater financial support and infrastructure, we could finally focus on building real processes and operate more strategically. At the time, Activision was still a relatively young company and we were the first external studio they acquired, so in many ways they were figuring things out alongside us. As both companies matured, we started bringing in consultants, executive coaches, and guest speakers, which helped accelerate our development as leaders and managers. That was when we really began to unlock the next stage of growth.

“Cultural fit became a non-negotiable part of our hiring and management philosophy. The damage caused by a toxic high performer happens much faster than most leaders appreciate.”

Bob: *What was a major inflection point for Raven after the acquisition?*

Brian: We started the company in 1990 and didn’t experience our first layoff until 2010, almost twenty years later. That was a major inflection point. It forced us to take a hard look at our values and identify areas where we needed to improve, a fundamental cultural change on a large scale.

One of the first changes involved the structure of our creative leadership team. Previously, creative directors were responsible for both the game itself and the people reporting to them, which often created people-management issues because creative and personnel responsibilities require very different skill sets. So, we separated those responsibilities and created what I called the “tending of the garden,” a cross-functional support structure in which each department had a dedicated leader focused on developing people, addressing HR concerns, supporting career growth, and overseeing training.

We also implemented a “No Brilliant Jerks” policy. In a creative industry like ours, you can have someone who is an exceptional programmer or artist, but if they’re corrosive to the environment, the culture, or the team dynamic, they’ll drive other people away, and you can’t allow that to happen. Cultural fit became a non-negotiable part of our hiring and management philosophy. The damage caused by a toxic high performer happens much faster than most leaders appreciate.

Sean: *When you look back at your best hires, did they tend to come from inside or outside the company?*

Brian: Many of our best leaders were people we developed ourselves, one reason our internship program was so important. That said, we also brought in outstanding people from outside when we needed to. There is no single formula: you try multiple approaches, trust your instincts, and make corrections quickly when something isn’t working. As an organization grows, the people who got you from Point A to Point B may not be the right people to get you from B to C, and leaders need to challenge their own blind spots on that.

Sean: *How do you see the executive hiring landscape in gaming today compared to when you started?*

Brian: A major shift is the premium now placed on seasoned executive leadership. Companies understand that one exceptional leader in the right role can save, or generate, millions or billions of dollars in value, so organizations are willing to invest more time and conduct a much deeper search rather than simply filling a seat quickly. The difference between a good hire and a great hire is transformational, I saw that firsthand at Raven.

Bob: *What was the best advice you received throughout your career around people and leadership?*

Brian: Start with curiosity and inquiry, not emotion. When something goes wrong, approach it with questions rather than reactions. The second lesson is to never be afraid to change or adapt. Over the years at Activision I worked for eight different bosses, and every transition required learning to operate within a new structure while still accomplishing what the organization needed. We had a simple mantra, move or die. That willingness to evolve is what sustained the company for 35 years.

Sean: *If you could go back and give your 29-year-old self one piece of advice as a new founder, what would it be?*

Brian: Follow your heart. You're on the right track. Don't be afraid. Be willing to evolve and change and trust that you'll know when it's time to do so. Steve and I made a vow early on that we would never step on people to get where we wanted to go, how you achieve success matters just as much as the success itself. Doing right by your team will take you further than any strategy ever could.

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Aaron Lapat
Managing Partner

Aaron provides executive talent counsel to CEOs, boards, and investors. His vertical expertise spans software, cloud, AI/Big Data, tech-enabled services, and internet infrastructure. His engagements focus on the CEO and C-suite, including commercial, technical, and financial leadership.



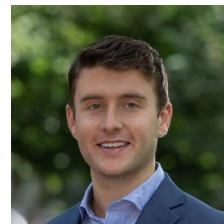
Bob Huseby
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Bob is a Partner in Park Square's Technology practice. He brings three decades of on-the-job operator experience in technology, media, gaming, and consumer platforms, including stints as the publisher of **GamePro** magazine, SVP of global sales at **Fandom.com** and CRO at **Imgur.com**.



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Sean leads executive-level searches for PE sponsors and portfolio companies, and growth-oriented public companies, across enterprise SaaS, semiconductors, tech-enabled services, infrastructure, hardware, and gaming. He focuses on placing CEO and C-Suite talent across technical, financial, and go-to-market functions.



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