At MahlerClean, Pat Sullivan built his career and worked his way through the ranks. In 1999, he started as a human resources coordinator, where he was recruiting, interviewing and onboarding service representatives for the company. In 2000, he was promoted to human resources manager and then to managing director in 2001. He became the president of MahlerClean in 2012.

“Customers want to work with individuals who are truthful and forthright with information — good or bad.”

What are some trends you see developing in the industry?
The escalation of wages, particularly with part-time labor, is creating much greater competition for personnel. In our market, BSCs have been slow to react to this and still bid jobs at the same wage rates as in the past.

What traits do you look for when hiring your staff?
A positive attitude. A courteous person — someone who is going to treat others with respect as we are in the people business. And someone with intuition. We need individuals who can anticipate a customer or employee need and act on it before they have to ask for it.

What is your approach to employee retention?
There is a lot of work that goes into hiring staff, and my approach is to try and retain employees at all costs. We need to have clear communication and shared understanding of expectations, and make sure employees have the training and tools they need to be successful. When we do experience turnover, I often ask myself and our team if we did everything we could to put the individual in the best position to succeed.

Fact: Pat received his bachelor’s degree in human resources management from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

Fact: MahlerClean, a division of Mahler Enterprises, Inc., was founded in 1989 and was named one of the Top Work Places in Southeastern Wisconsin by the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel four years in a row.

Name: Pat Sullivan, CBSE
Title: President
Company: MahlerClean
How would you describe your leadership style?
[I would describe myself as a] coach and mentor. I have been a youth baseball coach for many years, and apply some of the same lessons I have learned in the office to the baseball field and vice versa. Mistakes are going to happen in a service business, and we need to help each other learn from them. Leaders need to explain the “why” behind what they are asking for and what the potential consequence could be if we don’t execute as directed.

How do you maintain good relationships with your customers?
Honesty and transparency. Customers want to work with individuals who are truthful and forthright with information — good or bad. You have to connect live with people through telephone or in person. Too many people rely on email these days and lose out on the opportunity to create a genuine relationship with customers.

What is one challenge you’ve experienced in your career, and how did you handle it?
[One challenge we faced was] too much turnover in key management or customer-facing positions. We learned that the work demands we were putting on some of the senior managers was too much. Turnover in these key positions was challenging for a company of our size. I had to change our operations model to provide for a greater quality of life and sense of accomplishment for these individuals. We have had much greater success in retaining these key individuals, which has helped to create stronger relationships with our customers and provide better service.

What is the best piece of advice you’ve received in your career?
Be genuine in all that you do, and tell the truth so you never have to remember what lie you may have told. Great advice to follow in business and life!