As the founder and president of Affinity HR Group, Claudia St. John, SPHR, and her team of consultants help business owners navigate the many human resources issues — such as recruiting, performance management, compliance, etc.— that can affect operations. Here, she talks about the top three HR concerns BSCAI members face, as well as ways business owners can retain their employees.

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**How do you interact with building service contractors?**
We have been an endorsed affinity partner with BSCAI for a little over a year. BSCAI members may recognize us from the presentations we give at association events, our articles and our weekly email “Monday HR Minute,” a quick tip on people management issues. Building service contractors have a range of unique challenges that we try to assist them with. They often have a large, multi-state workforce, significant employee turnover, a decentralized form of management where leaders don’t interact with their employees on a regular basis, a large number of minority workers and, to cope with all of this, a very lean human resources department. We exist to try to help companies deal with these challenges.

**What would you say are the top three HR concerns for BSCAI members?**
Finding top talent, keeping top talent and being in compliance with the law. With an increasingly tight market for skilled labor, finding the right person for the job is always a concern. Employee engagement and high turnover are significant challenges because dealing with these issues can be both expensive and time consuming.
Finally, compliance is tricky because each state and, in some instances, city or locale, has its own laws and regulations. Many employers think that they are unlikely to be audited for compliance, and they’re often right. But with high turnover, you run the risk of having a disgruntled employee quit and make a claim against the company. These employee complaints are the basis for the vast majority of lawsuits faced by the companies that come to us for help.

What are some ways business owners can retain and develop their best employees?
Employers that know and have a relationship with their employees are best suited to be able to address their needs. The key to employee engagement is ensuring that employees know what is expected of them, know where the company is going and how they contribute to that strategic direction, know that they have the resources to do the job well, are aware that they have opportunities for growth and development, and feel that someone at work cares about them. Companies whose leaders can make those connections are much more likely to have a highly engaged workforce and minimal turnover.

What do you think makes for a good corporate culture?
In a word: leadership. There’s an ancient Chinese proverb that says the fish rots from the head down. Inspiration flows that way too. Organizations where the leadership is engaged, cares about employees and plays by the same set of rules as everyone else are sure to have a solid corporate culture. Organizations where the leadership is disconnected, unconcerned or out of reach usually have a poor corporate culture.

What was the most challenging experience of your career?
When I was a young consultant working for Mercer HR Consulting, I was assigned to a huge national account negotiating health benefits. My duties were largely analytical, sorting spreadsheets much of the day. I loved the company and I loved my clients and colleagues, but I hated the work. It’s how I discovered the role of behavioral styles. I learned that I am a strong extrovert and get my best work done through people, not spreadsheets. It has helped me understand that different people are suited for different jobs, and the more we can understand the needs of the job and the strengths/weaknesses of the employee, we can make suitable matches and avoid unhappy, disengaged workers.

What is the best piece of advice you’ve received in your career?
I carry with me three “golden nuggets” from my first boss and mentor: 1) Never bring forward a problem without first thinking through two or three solutions, 2) never complain down — it’s an organizational cancer, and 3) treat others the way you want to be treated — be nice.

What book are you reading right now?
I am currently writing a book and that has caused me to re-read my favorite go-to business books that I recommend to all of my clients: “The Thin Book of Trust” by Charles Feltman; “Tell Me How I’m Doing” by Richard Williams; “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” by Patrick Leancini; and “Crucial Conversations” by Patterson, Grenny, McMillan and Switzler.