Rob Kohlhagen began his career working for a large commercial paper company headquartered in Philadelphia. “I was recruited to S.C. Johnson Professional (our name at the time in 1995) to be the building service contractor segment manager. I’ve now been at Sealed Air Diversey Care for over 20 years.” Over the years, Kohlhagen has seen a lot. Here, he tells of lessons learned, the best advice he’s received in his career and what he thinks some BSCs should do differently.

“Winners in the market are those companies that put a strong emphasis on building great leaders in their companies.”

How has the building service contracting industry changed over the years? In many respects, the industry hasn't changed dramatically. It's still very much a people/labor management business that is challenged to be profitable working on low margins in a competitive industry. Since I started, BSCs have always been working to diversify their service offerings, with some expanding broadly into FM services and others only venturing as far as, say, construction cleanup. I see many BSCs working hard to innovate in their service offerings and markets they want to serve. Technology is changing so fast that, like all of us, they are racing to keep up and integrate it into their value proposition. What never changes is that the winners in the market are those companies that put a strong emphasis on building great leaders in their companies. Success is driven by people who know and people who care. Great BSCs cultivate great leaders through career advancement and mentoring.

From your experience working with building service contractors, what are some of the most impressive and desirable traits that you've witnessed? There's a strong correlation from what I've seen between safety and quality. Those who focus on safety also seem to have the best customer retention through sustained quality delivery. Again, I'll also emphasize management development as a critical component of many BSCs' strategy. Look up the list of BSCs who put their managers through BSCAI's RBSM and CBSE program, and you'll find the 'Who's Who' of the best BSCs in America. They invest in people and know it's the 'X factor' of success.
What do you wish BSCs would do differently?
It's certainly not the top-tier quality BSCs I'm speaking to in this response: 1) Stop lowball pricing to win bids and skimping on the service requirements to make a profit. That's called cheating. 2) If you're hiring undocumented workers and not paying them benefits and not funding workers comp to lower your costs and win bids, please stop and start playing by the rules — and the law.

What has been the most challenging experience in your career?
We've lost customers and big RFPs over the years, and it always stings. Everyone knows the feeling, and it's tough to put a lot of effort into something as a team and come up short. It does hopefully make you better, but, well, it sucks to lose. Most of the people I've met in the industry are really competitive and love to win.

What do you believe makes for a good working relationship with customers?
Honesty and integrity are always top of the list. If people don't trust you, based on your track record of earning their trust, then you're dead in the water. You never get a second chance to prove it. After that, I'd say it's all about being a good communicator. People appreciate good timely, comprehensive but concise communication.

What is the best piece of advice you've received in your career?
My first sales trainer told me in 1986: 'You've got a special talent for this, and you can be mildly successful if you skate by and give it an 80 percent effort. But if you seize your God-given talent and try to go 100 percent, you can really make a mark.' So I try to wake up every day having to prove myself all over again.

What book are you reading right now?
I read the Jack Reacher series for escape. I want Reacher's head for numbers and his memory (because mine's fading). My recommendation to folks for reading material is to catch Bret Stephens every Tuesday in the Opinion section of The Wall Street Journal. I'm awed by his intellect and perspective and always keep my iPhone dictionary app handy.