Driving Success through a Strong People Focus

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**Title:** President  
**Company:** ESS Clean

People matter. At the base of Paul Taylor’s personal and business values lies that simple notion. As president of Ill.-based ESS Clean, Taylor has used a people-first approach to drive the company forward, focusing on the satisfaction of his employees, his customers and his community to do so. Read on to see how he handled the challenges first-time entrepreneurship brought, as well as the values system ESS Clean team members live by.

**How long have you been in the building service contracting industry?**

I’ve been in the contract cleaning industry since 1995. I graduated from the University of Illinois in 1994 with a degree in agricultural engineering and went to work for a startup company that went bankrupt in early 1995. Then I worked as a remodeling contractor for six months. I finished my last remodeling job and considered myself lucky to have survived.

**How did you get your start as a BSC?**

I was very fortunate to be around a network of professionals who were working on indoor air quality initiatives in 1995. Building service contracting has a significant impact on indoor air quality, and my colleagues suggested there was a market for a building service contracting company focused on improving indoor air quality. It was not my idea, but I liked it. The first two years were extremely difficult. In 1997, we were $40,000 in debt, surviving on my wife’s fellowship income and eating macaroni and cheese. After some soul searching, I decided that getting out of debt was necessary — whatever it took. That meant cleaning the few contracts we had at that time by myself. I was now a college grad cleaning up after college students. I got up at 3 a.m. every day and cleaned several buildings before going in to the office to work on sales and marketing. This was a great opportunity for me to develop my humility muscles.

**Aside from the challenges you faced getting into the business, what are some of the challenges you’ve had to address now as president of ESS Clean?**
The biggest challenge we face is hiring and retaining a quality team that adheres to our core values. We have struggled with this since day one, but we get better at it every day. First and most importantly, we hire the right people. We wait, if necessary, to fill a position with the right person. We are careful to not hire just a warm body that will do the job. Second, we compensate our team better than our competitors. Our pay is higher, and our benefits are better. Third, we spend lots of time training and coaching our staff.

The other big challenge we face is growing profitably. I believe that if we are not growing, we are declining. We must continue to grow in order to attract and retain a top-notch management team. We must continue to offer opportunities for advancement. We have to grow to keep our team interested and fired up about the future. It is difficult to grow profitably when we are moving into new communities where lower price and lower-quality service are the norm. We have to educate our customers about the benefits of quality service and how it will improve their business.

What values do your team members abide by?

Our values are:

- Honesty
- Always get the job done
- Provide the best value
- Improve the lives of our team
- Have fun
- Operate debt-free

We live by these values, and we talk about them every day. They guide our actions and decisions. I hope that our values result in consistent actions and decisions by everyone on our team. I believe that when I am gone, our management team makes the right moves based on our values.

I believe the result of our values is a company where people want to come to work every day, where they have confidence in our management decisions and where they trust us to do the right thing. I also believe our customers appreciate us enough to continue allowing us to serve them and paying us well to do so.

All team members at ESS Clean, including yourself, seem to be very active in the community. How important is giving back?

The first part of serving the community is taking care of our team. Our team is the community. We also feel that serving the community is taking care of our customers. Our customers are the community. We do this so that they can focus on their core business, knowing that cleaning and maintenance are taken care of.
After we have taken care of our team and our customers, we do recognize the importance of community involvement outside of ESS. It is good for us as individuals, and it is good for the company. I believe that “to whom much is given, much is expected,” and we have been blessed. Our company has had some success, and it is our responsibility to help others. I believe that it is the responsibility of the local community to care for those less fortunate, and that the government does a lousy job of it. Not to mention, it’s a good recruiting tool and it doesn’t hurt our marketing efforts. Throughout the past several years, we have donated our time and resources to build a kitchen at a homeless shelter, develop a community garden in a crime-ridden neighborhood and provide meals and building restoration services at a local shelter. We encourage our staff to be involved in mentoring and other community service efforts because it builds character.

How does ESS Clean keep its employees engaged? What are some of your employee retention techniques?

Our best employee retention technique is hiring the right person. We look for people who are honest, reliable and have similar values. Then we train them to do the job. Waiting to hire the right person is the most significant way to improve retention. We have numerous incentive programs including health insurance, 401(k), paid time off, etc., but all of these programs do very little to help us keep good employees. They do help us to attract the right people.

What has been the greatest takeaway from your membership in BSCAI?

The greatest takeaway from BSCAI is the education that keeps us ahead of our competition on a professional level. BSCAI has helped ESS Clean face every new challenge, from growth strategies to management structure to adapting to new regulations. We have continued to go back every year to conferences and educational sessions to learn. As we continue to grow, there is always another BSCAI member that is a step or two ahead of us and can provide a few key insights to help us get to the next level. I appreciate the education, the networking opportunities and the professionalism provided by BSCAI.

What are some key principles you live by?

The principles that I live by are the same as our company values. I would add that I believe we are all physical, spiritual and emotional beings. We need to keep these areas of our lives in balance. If one area suffers, the others will suffer as well. We need to stay healthy, and we need to keep our priorities straight. My priorities are faith, family and work, in that order.

What would you say is the most important lesson you’ve learned in the business?

I would say the most important lesson I have learned is that people matter. The numbers are important and we have to make a profit to survive, but numbers aren’t everything. The people we work with, the people we work for and the people that work for us are all important. I believe everyone should be treated well, and sometimes that means getting my ego out of the way.