Tom Kruse, CBSE, believes that mutual respect goes a long way in business—in fact, it’s his No. 1 rule in creating a great corporate culture. He said that he owes his perspective on treating people fairly, regardless of their title or position within the company, to his parents. Read on to see what else Tom feels is important in succeeding not only in business but in everyday life.

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**How long have you been in this industry? How did you get your start?**

I started in the industry at a young age, probably in fourth or fifth grade. I would work with my father cleaning small one-to-two hour a week accounts in the evening, helping to support the family. Looking back, it was a great experience, and it provided me a valuable perspective that can never be taken away. I owe an awful lot to my dad for teaching me about humility and the value of treating people with respect, regardless of their position on the org chart.

**How has the industry changed since you started 30 years ago?**

The industry is vastly different. It has become much more professionalized. The second- and third-generation companies are much more sophisticated these days. The industry has also drawn the attention of larger and well-financed investors who now see the industry as a legitimate opportunity to monetize through roll-ups and private equity funding vehicles.
Additionally, third-party management companies play a much bigger role in the industry expanding into sectors of the market where it was not common to have their involvement. Not a bad thing, per se, but it certainly changes the landscape.

The BSC industry is, like all industries, not immune to change.

**What key factors are important in having a sustainable career in building service contracting?**

Without a doubt, the key is perspective. I’ll tell you a bit about my experience.

I worked several years as a cleaner. That taught me a lot about people. The job site associates in our industry work hard and in environments that many people would not survive in (or be willing to). I have a lot of respect for that. The most successful leaders I see in our industry have (and value) this perspective.

I worked several years as an entrepreneur running my own BSC company. I know what it is like to be nervous about making payroll, managing A/R and sleepless nights covering job sites — again, having a perspective that creates a tremendous amount of respect for those people in the industry running their own small and mid-size companies. Everybody wants to enjoy the American dream of owning their own company, but many do not realize all of the challenges that come with it.

Selling my company and working for a larger company provided me with a whole new view of the industry. The basics are the same, but everything is on a much larger stage. It is a challenging, fun and fast-paced environment. I am blessed that I work for a company and CEO that get it. Marsden is a larger player but still retains the values, outlook and focus of an entrepreneurial enterprise.

I don’t know if any one experience is more important than the other, but perspective that provides a 360-degree view is important. I wouldn’t trade any of these experiences.

**Marsden seems to be rooted deeply within the community. Why is it important to give back?**

It is important to view the community as a customer. We are all part of a community that is intertwined and interrelated. A company operating in a way that it is only taking hurts itself in the long run. Marsden participates and leads in all of the communities where we do business. Our CEO, Guy Mingo, sets a great example.

**What is one important challenge you’ve experienced in your career, and how did you handle it?**

I tend to be a slow learner, having to learn things the hard way so there are plenty of examples. However, once I figure it out it sticks with me.

I think selling my business and working through all of the emotional aspects of that would be at the top of the list. When owners sell their companies, the focus tends to be on the financial and legal structure of the deal. The emotional side gets overlooked and usually blind sides them once the dust has settled. I can relate to that. There was a lot of fall out, to say the least. I had incredible support from my wife, Sue, first and foremost. She was a rock. She spent countless hours talking with me about it.

Second, I had support from Skip Marsden and Guy Mingo. They had gone through the sale of Marsden Building Maintenance a few years earlier and understood some of what I was going through. They created an environment where people could be themselves and speak freely. That helped a lot.

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I don’t regret selling my company one bit. Because of that experience, I think I am supremely qualified to help others through the process in the event they choose to go down a similar path.

**What qualities do you think make for a good corporate culture?**

1. Respect for the individual, regardless of their position in the company. Your title does not
define your value as a human being.

2. A “can-do” approach. Sounds a bit cliché, I know. However, starting with the concept of “why not?” when an opportunity presents itself pushes people to expand and grow. People get excited by that.

3. Going to “the spot.” You can’t run a crew, branch office or company from behind a desk. Interacting with people and being part of the solution is not only effective, but it shows people you care.

4. Growth of the individual equals growth of the company and vice versa.

What is the best piece of advice you’ve received in your career?

My mom and dad taught me the value of treating people with respect. They are great role models in this area. I was fortunate enough to experience some success in my career because of the people around me. It is the third-shift cleaner in a building alone who did the right thing even when no one was watching, or the manager who left his family on a holiday to respond to a building emergency who deserve the most respect. Those seemingly small acts are the things collectively that make a company a success. My parents were right on target with their advice.