RULE #3

No Mutual Mystification

Accountability requires clarity of expectations.

AS A MANAGER, have you ever experienced any of these issues?

- Your salespeople's calls don't seem to have clear or actionable next steps with the buyer.
- Your internal meetings don't have an agenda, and if they do, they get off track too often.
- There are no actionable next steps after sales meetings or in your sales process.
- After your team delivers a proposal, too much time passes before a decision from the buyer.
- You want to have a culture of accountability, but you don't know how to start it.

In today's world, many managers don't get to develop people the way they would like. It's harder and harder to spend quality time with all the team members so managers must make sure each interaction delivers value for everyone. This means creating structure and clarity around all interactions with the team.

Not all interactions are structured, of course. There's no need to set an agenda for a short talk in the break room about last night's ballgame. But there are times you do need guidelines to make sure that people understand why they are there, that they get a chance to put their questions on the table, and that they are clear on next steps. Being a leader makes it extremely important that you identify such interactions and ensure everyone is on the same page. Formal conversations and meetings (both internal and external) are good places to add structure in the form of something Sandler calls an "up-front contract."

The up-front contract allows salespeople to set up a roadmap for a sales meeting before the discussion begins in earnest. Basically, it sets the ground rules for the discussion to come. This concept can also be applied directly to management situations. In fact, it must become part of your sales team's culture. As the leader, you set that culture by your behavior.

Up-front contracts are mutually-agreed-upon expectations between individuals that are established before moving forward in any endeavor. In sales, when you set an up-front contract with a buyer, both of you have agreed to what will happen next, provided that a specific set of events occurs. The mechanics are more involved, but the concept is simple.

In sales management, when you and a salesperson have an up-front contract, both of you know exactly how much time has been allotted for your discussion, what questions and agendas have been shared and agreed to, what decisions need to be made, and what is supposed to happen next. Neither you nor the salesperson will be surprised later.

You both want clarity and momentum; you both want to succeed. The up-front contract keeps the topics focused and the next steps clear. That's good for both sides.

How much more effective could your team be if each and every interaction had total clarity on questions like, "Why are we here? What do we each want to talk about? What are the possible outcomes?"

Most sales teams don't address those questions before an interaction begins. They waste a lot of time and mental energy trying to figure out what the other side meant or what the other person wants. If you can clear up that mutual mystification in each conversation, you will, by default, be more productive.

Think about how nice it would be if, every time you met with your team, you and all the team members had perfect clarity about why you were there and what was happening next. Think about how nice it would be if both sides got their needs met and all the supporting next steps were clearly set and agreed to. Think of the momentum you could build. Salespeople would know what was expected and where they stood each and every step of the way—and they would take action.

When you create mutual agreement, you are establishing the ground rules not only for the discussion that is about to take place but also for the working relationship between yourself and your employees. Specifically, the contract should cover the following elements.

- **Purpose:** "Why are we here today?"
- **Time:** "How much time are we agreeing to allot for this meeting?"
- **Agenda:** "What is this meeting about? What do I [as the sales leader] want to cover? What do you [the salesperson or -people] want to cover?"
- **Outcome:** "What are the potential decisions and/or next steps we want to see to by the end of the meeting?" (You'll actually discuss this prior to starting the meeting.)

You can cover these in any order you want, as long as you touch all the bases. In practice, an up-front contract could sound like this:

Manager: Thanks for taking the time to meet today. This session will take approximately 40 minutes. I have blocked out the time. Is that still good for you as well?

Salesperson: Yes. I have set aside one hour so we are fine.

Manager: OK. Great. My feeling is that we should focus on prospecting over this period of time. What I'm hoping is that we will both contribute thoughts on ways to improve your effectiveness in this key area, and, at the end of the meeting, develop some action steps for you to take between this session and the next one. Are you comfortable with us spending our time this way?

Salesperson: Yes, I am. Sounds fine.

Manager: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Salesperson: Well, I know I'm struggling with developing a consistent prospecting methodology, and I know there are times when I avoid prospecting altogether because of that. Additionally, I'm having trouble dealing with the constant rejection I face on the phone.

Manager: OK. I'll add those issues to the list, and we can deal with them during the session.

You will find your meetings are more productive, anxiety on both sides will decrease, and goals will be met if you manage your interactions with customers and team members using up-front contracts. Contracts like these model an important selling behavior for the team, make your life easier, make your salesperson's life easier, and lead to much more productive interactions. They do require more effort and practice—but this investment in time and energy pays off many times over.

THE SANDLER TAKEAWAY FOR SALES LEADERS

Make the up-front contract part of your sales team's culture.

1. Before any meeting make sure you briefly discuss its purpose, time, agenda, and possible outcomes.
2. Use up-front contracts to set expectations for an interaction and manage by creating accountability.
3. Ask what the up-front contract will be for each call your team goes on. Use that language.

For information on how to get Sandler's Up-Front Contract tool, see David Mattson's book THE SANDLER RULES FOR SALES LEADERS.