

TO THE ***EDGE*** and **Back**



Take a journey with Sam Porter, a Sales Rep on the edge of burnout and failure, who through a chance encounter discovers the 4 R's that lead him back from the edge.

Bill James

To the Edge and Back

An Adventure in Sales

Bill James
with Nick Inskip



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Dedication/Acknowledgements

A very special thank you to Nick Inskip – a man I met in an elevator, had a joke with and who became a good friend.

Meeting periodically at a café to review a chapter and discuss the next one, he is really responsible for these ideas becoming a book. One of the most intelligent and generous people I have ever met.

Thank you, Nick.

To Daniel Batten. Boy, we had fun playing with ideas. One of us would put up a thought, the other would expand it, and then the first would make it better again.

Many ideas I now work with have an element of Daniel in them – some more than others. If you asked Daniel, I feel confident he would acknowledge my part in his journey. In the end we agreed we should simply share our ideas and, while we have both evolved further, we had a common thread in those years that stays with me today.

Thank you, Daniel.

A final thank you to all those that have worked with me. As I have improved your businesses and provided a vehicle to help you become sales winners, you have provided me with a proving ground and the chance to continually modify and learn. Where would any presenter be without you.

Foreword

Every day in businesses wherever I go, I meet sales professionals that are experts at what they do and are technically excellent. They have passion and drive for their subject and deliver fantastic value through their solutions.

But there is an area of their role that is difficult – and that is sales. These often somewhat introverted experts find it so hard to step out of their comfort zone and actively promote what they do.

It is the part of the job that causes distress and tension whenever it needs to be done. It is quietly talked about around the lunch room or over a wine or beer and often involves words like “if only I didn’t have to...” and knowing looks between kindred spirits.

You can put it off, but when all is said and done you cannot avoid it, can you? It has to be done. So this book is for all you reluctant sales professionals that would rather not ‘do sales’ but know you have to.

This is a sales fable as opposed to a dry ‘how to’ book. The value comes from seeing the ideas rolled out and the difference they make in the life of Sam, our hero. Please enjoy it for what it is. An easy read with many practical and usable ideas mixed into the storyline.

Some of the real learnings in this book have nothing to do with sales and everything to do with people. You may have to watch out for them as they are a simple paragraph later in the book.

You will also notice some repetition of themes and ideas with various examples – no apology. That is how we learn.

May some of the ideas make your lives easier and happily more productive.

Who is Bill James, CSP. B.Com



Bill James is a humorous, authentic and content-driven business speaker, who inspires, educates and entertains audiences throughout New Zealand and Australia - well anywhere actually!

The buy line for his company "3 Piece Sales" is 'for people that don't like selling but have to anyway and giving experts an unfair edge.'

He specialises in working with those who are technically expert at what they do and deliver solutions with sincere passion but who find the idea of promoting what they do and asking for the sale a real challenge.

By aligning them with the sales process they have to use and showing them how to frame themselves as the answer to the client's challenge, he has helped thousands to step up into a sales role safely and with integrity.

He also leads the best in sales to become even better with 'hard-edged soft skills' that make all the difference and provide that 1% advantage that gets you over the line where others fail.

As a leader in 'zero dollar' marketing, he creates offline guerrilla-style marketing solutions that leverage existing marketing activity for no or low cost. It is not unusual to see effectiveness double.

His sales and marketing ideas work everywhere from one man operations through to large multi-nationals.

A Certified Speaking Professional, Bill was awarded the New Zealand Speaker of the Year (2015-16) and was previously the Business Speaker of the Year (2012). He is also past national president of the National Speakers Association of New Zealand.

Having achieved his Bachelor of Commerce with a double major in marketing and personnel, Bill has enjoyed a long and successful professional sales career. A National Sales Manager at just 26 years of age Bill has worked from selling dining clubs door to door through to negotiating million dollar contracts.

His experience spans B2B, B2C and telesales from cars to insurance, banking to dining clubs.

Wherever he goes, he sets records from achieving 430% of his first year's target in the insurance sector to quadrupling his branch turnover in the banking and finance sector.

He gets results.

Outside of his professional life, Bill has been married to his wife and business partner Sue for 30 years and they have two daughters.

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Chapter 1

Sam Porter sat in his office, with a worried look on his face. Everything shook as if he was living in an apartment right next to a train track. The office on the mezzanine floor had originally been the factory foreman's and shared a wall with the overhead crane's tracks, and shook every time it rolled by. Sometimes it seemed as if the placement of the office was an indicator of how his organisation felt about 'sales'.

That said, they were always quick to remind him that sales - the lifeblood of the factory - was in his hands. He needed no reminding. Sales had not been good recently. He could blame the economy, the factory for missing deadlines or even his own stress levels getting in the way. The simple fact was that the sales techniques he had trusted through his entire sales career were just not working anymore.

'Maybe I need to change jobs,' he thought to himself as he let out a deep sigh and stared out of the window. His desk and 'In Tray' were both stacked high with tender documents, all marked 'VERY URGENT'.

He was overwhelmed and knew he simply could not respond properly to them all.

The costing department down the hall always complained that they never had enough notice of upcoming tenders and he suspected that sometimes they just took a guess.

If so, then guessing too high so that the company didn't lose money meant that the price he submitted may have cost them the tender anyway. Too low meant a financial loss. It was a nightmare.

Sam prided himself on tidy, concise and complete presentations. How could you do that based on guesswork, stress and panic? He stood up and stretched his tired muscles. Should he move on and leave it to a younger person with the energy to cope?

He wandered down to the lunchroom and sat with a coffee. "Drinking too many of these," he muttered as he looked at the mug his daughter had given him inscribed with 'Best Dad' on it.

Guilt pulled him back to his office.

A strange wave of panic hit him when the phone rang. "Hello, Sam Porter here, how may I help you?" The words he had rehearsed and spoken a thousand times, carefully crafted to exude a confidence he didn't feel.

He breathed a sigh of relief; it was his wife Penny. She was one person that knew he was having problems.

"Amber called, Tony has some free tickets to 'Business in the Pub' this evening, and they want us to join them."

Amber and Tony were their closest friends. They ran their own growing business and often spent their time going to seminars and conferences. 'Business in the Pub' had guest speakers for ten to fifteen minutes at a time. What value could you gain in that short a time?

His repeated excuses around the amount of work he had were met with obvious disappointment. Sam's heart sank. Penny was his rock and, on top of everything else, he didn't want to disappoint her.

"What time?" he asked.

"7 p.m.," she said, "So we can go?"

"Ok, but I will have to meet you there, so I can get some work done."

"Great," she said excitedly, "I'll get a ride with Amber, that way I don't have to be too careful with the wine!"

He could imagine her smiling and felt guilty. It highlighted how much he had been neglecting her and he knew deep down it would probably not change for a while.

Sam sighed again and opened a tender folder. He frowned at an ambiguous clause and picked up the phone to call the company that had put out the tender. When it was answered on the first ring, it caught him by surprise.

"Sam Porter here," he said, a smile he didn't feel, plastered on his face from years of practice. "I just wanted to clarify the meaning of a clause in the contract," he continued.

"XRT 189429, clause 7.1.1" he answered when asked, "I'll just find the tender number..."

The call didn't go well, a question on this had already been asked by another tenderer, and an email had been sent to all tenderers with the answer.

Feeling foolish he thanked them and wondered what kind of negative impression he had left. The time pressure he was under was making too many cracks like this appear.

Chapter 2

"Where are you?" Penny asked, "I'm waiting outside with your ticket."

Sam glanced at his watch, 7 p.m.

"I'm on my way." He said after a muttered curse. Almost tripping as he took the stairs two at a time he was in his car in a minute.

"Where's Penny?" Sam asked as he ran up to the pub where Tony was waiting with a disapproving look on his face.

"I had to park three streets away, every spot is taken around here," Sam defended himself.

"Come on then. Penny and Amber are inside. It's too cold out here."

The Poster proclaimed 'BILL JAMES – Don't fake it – you won't make it!' and Sam mentally rolled his eyes. Another self-help guru, just what he needed!

They showed their tickets and entered the small room behind the bar. Every seat was filled, except for the two that Penny and Amber had been fighting to save.

To Sam's relief, Penny looked pleased that he was there and had even gotten a beer for him. "You just made it." She reached for his hand, and he began to relax. It felt good to stop working and be with Penny.

The MC started the proceedings. The president said a few words and new members were introduced and loudly applauded. Then it was time for the guest speaker.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, BAP, Business at the Pub, is proud to present our International Speaker, the man who shows us how to simplify our selling, Mr Bill James."

The audience applauded loudly, surprising Sam, who had been prepared for a lacklustre evening.

The man from the poster walked from beside the slightly raised stage to the front and paused for a moment. Without preamble, he started straight into his talk.

"How many people here work in sales?" he asked.

A number of hands went up. Penny grabbed Sam's arm and held it up for him, even though the last thing he wanted was to attract attention to himself.

"And how many of you really enjoy it? You know, jump out of bed in the morning and just cannot wait to put in those long hard hours? To go knock on one more door to see if someone will be kind enough to see you?" Bill said. Sam like so many others in the room lowered his hand back down to his lap. At least he was not alone in that sentiment.

"In truth, we all are involved in sales. Every day we try and sell concepts and convince people that our ideas are right. How many of you work hard to get your kids to tidy their bedrooms? Or that your idea is the one to follow at work? Or, I wonder, how many of you were convinced you should be here tonight? We ALL sell. Every day, in some way, we try to move people in the direction we want them to go, to influence their thinking to our point of view.

"That uncomfortable feeling you may be having as I talk about sales is called reluctance. It is natural when we talk about sales, not just in you, but in most people.

"So what is it that makes 'sales' such a topic? That brings out such a reaction? How about we try a little wordplay to demonstrate? I have a word written on this whiteboard, and I will show it to you in a moment. I would like you to shout out the first word that comes into your heads. Would you all be happy to do that?"

Murmured agreements came from the audience, and Bill pulled the cover of the whiteboard to reveal the word 'SALESMAN'. He then went around the room and asked for associated words. The list grew as he wrote them down.

When he has finished, there were a dozen or so words like dishonest, sneaky, contracts, car salesman, white shoes, door-to-door, liar, and many others.

"Not particularly flattering are they," Bill said. "And therein lays the problem. A question we must ask ourselves. If you feel that this is what a salesman represents, then how can you possibly represent yourself as something you find so unappealing?"

The audience was quiet in thought.

"At a very basic level, you betray that you are not comfortable about something to your potential customers and they pick this up. They almost certainly do not understand what it is that makes you feel uncomfortable, but the fact that you are is interpreted as hiding something, that your product has a fault, and all sorts of other negative assumptions depending on what they think."

"Remember that when you are selling, most people you see have preconceived ideas themselves and will often look for fault, and there you are providing it."

"In point of fact," Bill continued, "you decide how you sell anything. You govern your actions and your level of honesty in how you sell. No one else can do that for you. Even a boss that says to grab a deal and make it stick at any cost is not actually there with you when you are in front of a customer. It is up to you to decide how you do the job."

"And influencing how and what the other person is buying is actually what you are there to do. If you have an excellent solution and it will genuinely help them solve a problem, why wouldn't you present it in a powerful and influential way? You do not serve the potential client if you let them purchase an inferior solution from a competitor simply because they can sell better than you."

"Have you ever lost an internal promotion to someone that you know would not do the job as well as you but they have the connections and interviewed better than you?" Heads nodded in areas of the room. "The company is not better off, and neither is the client that gets the inferior product."

"One last thing to think about before we move on. The person you are seeing knows why you are there. They understood what you do for a living when they made the appointment – you are representing an organisation and selling something to them. They get it. They actually want you to show them what you do, to solve a problem they feel they have, show them new ideas and stop them from making mistakes. They invited you there to do those things and will feel short-changed if you fail to do so."

"They know why you are there and expect you to propose something or you are wasting their time. It is only us that have the problem with this. Not the customer."

"Tonight it would be a pleasure to provide an insight that almost everyone in sales has overlooked. It is so basic and easy to do that you can adopt it tomorrow and gain immediate improvement. You will gain more sales, be seen as someone that can make the grade and quite possibly be allowed the freedom to operate as you would like to. Would that be a good subject for the evening?" The audience was gaining enthusiasm with a proposition that promised so much.

"That's good to know. So let's do just that. While we have seen that everyone is involved in sales in some way, let us focus on direct sales. For those of you who work directly in sales, what areas do you work in? May I ask you?" Bill said, gesturing to Sam.

"Engineering sales," Sam replied, dutifully.

Bill nodded, pointing to another one of the audience members who had put their hands up. "Insurance" he responded.

Others said cars, appliances and one said, 'events like this.'

"And are you from a sales or an engineering background?" Bill had returned his attention to Sam.

"Engineering," said Sam, wishing he had stuck with engineering instead of getting involved in sales. Others also admitted to starting in other areas and moving into a sales role.

"Well, our journey starts with a trip back down memory lane – at least for me. Please come with me. When I was a child in primary school in England, I had a real passion for singing. I had a three-octave range which was pretty cool and a lot of fun. You can sing just about anything with that range."

"When I was ten my family emigrated to New Zealand and in those days you usually travelled by ship; our ship was scheduled to leave from Southampton. I had been part of the local brass band, and when we were about to board the ship, my dad saw a trumpet for sale at the market on the dock and spent his last two pounds buying it for me."

"Now you have to understand that it was my trumpet, but more importantly than that, it was a gift from my Dad. I loved my Dad, and I decided right there I was going to focus on playing the trumpet. I stopped using my voice to sing."

Bill continued, "We arrived in New Zealand and settled in Takapuna in Auckland, and I joined the Takapuna City Silver Band, and the school orchestra as well."

He paused and looked across the crowd. To Sam, it looked like he was staring right at him. Surely it was his imagination and an overtired mind. Bed would have been a good idea, but at least Penny got to go out for the evening, which was something. Bill's voice pulled him back.

"The clues were there right from the start. At my high school, my orchestra mistress pointed out the parts of the music that she wanted me to push the keys, but where she preferred, I did not actually blow. If you spend 5 years on book one and never get past page 17 there is a hint there, right? The Takapuna City Silver Band was a great band, and whenever we performed, I proudly got to be the banner boy, dutifully holding my sign." Bill smiled; it was the smile of a proud schoolboy, leading the march with the band behind him."

"Bless the rhino hide of youth. It never occurred to me that they just didn't dare have me actually play! Do you remember those things you used to think you were really amazing at, but adult hindsight reveals them differently to you? Basically, my playing stunk!"

He looked around the room and noted the laughter and saw the realisation in the audience.

"For the sake of authenticity, I thought I would introduce you to an old friend." Bill bent down and retrieved a small case and quickly opened it. When he stood up, he was holding a very old and beaten up trumpet, polished, but very obviously dented and showing its age.

With a slightly far-away look in his eyes, he continued, "Now I suspect I know what you are thinking, 'He couldn't be that bad, could he?' Who would like to hear me play the trumpet?"

Sam found that something in the story had struck a chord, and he didn't know what, but suddenly he wanted to hear Bill play the trumpet and he joined in with some others who were encouraging Bill to play.

"Seriously, were you not listening?" Bill smiled picking up the trumpet as a quiet laughter went through the room.

He held it lovingly, put it to his lips and began to play.

Even an untutored ear could tell he wasn't very good. It wasn't as bad as someone who couldn't play at all, but it wouldn't be comfortable to listen to for long. He stopped, and everyone applauded.

He smiled back at them and placed the trumpet gently back in its place on the stage.

"I know you are applauding because I stopped and I now realise that much of the applause at school was for the same reason." A few people chuckled.

"In my last year at high school, I thought I would try out for the school show. So I dusted off the voice I had not used for half a decade and gave it a go." He paused for effect. "And I got the lead role just like that."

Without further preamble, Bill stood up straight and began to sing. Even with no accompaniment, he sounded pretty good, certainly better than Sam. When he stopped, the whole room applauded loudly. He smiled and nodded in appreciation. They fell silent and sat back down; he took a sip of water and continued.

"So the real lesson I learned from the trumpet was that I was a singer! But all those years of playing the trumpet meant that I hadn't been singing, and the real sadness is that I should have been getting better at my natural talent. That was where I could provide value to people that listened to me. My motivation was pure – I played the trumpet because I loved my Dad. But when I stop to think about it, he would have had much more pleasure from my singing than he ever did listening to my terrible trumpet playing. After all, guess who used to hear me practising at home?" Once again the audience chuckled.

"In fact, when you think a bit deeper about it, my Dad would have been very disappointed to think that he might have had something to do with me NOT singing and using a pretty good voice. As it turns out, for all my good intention, I was not doing the right thing by him either.

"The reason I am sharing this story with you is that I am a salesman and the most important thing about being a successful salesman, or most other things for that matter, is to be real – the real you. Play to your natural talents, and just because someone has given you a trumpet, it doesn't mean you will be good at playing it. My motivation was well founded, but my decision to learn to play was just the wrong one for me. And as is so often the way it took me far too long to realise.

"You will see other amazing sales professionals closing sales and doing things you would love to do – but you are not them. Try their ideas but always realise that you can only work with the ones that are a natural fit for you. You can only be you, and you need to use the tools that fit your hands. The key is to play to those strengths."

Bill's voice dropped a tone, and he became very still.

"Folks, the message for the night is a simple one, but it can change everything about the way you achieve sales success and leave the nervous approaches and false ideas behind. It is this. *Being real gets the deal*. Simple as that."

Into the silence of the room Bill repeated, "Being real gets the deal."

Now Sam found his curious attention focused on every word Bill said, he was not sure how it applied to him, but something was bubbling away in the back of his mind that said, 'you are not a real salesman', though he didn't want to admit it. Maybe he should give up, find something that suited him better. Perhaps that was Bill's message. He sipped his drink as Bill began speaking again.

"One reason this is such a key is that your clients are savvier and possibly more judgmental than ever and they are looking for the lie in your words. They check you out online now and know a lot about you before you even arrive, and most have heard it all.

"One thing they are not used to is the honesty of your approach and the genuine you that shows up. Just as they can tell when you are nervous or hiding something, they can tell when you are the real deal. It is very obvious."

"I appreciate that having limitations can seem a disadvantage, but you can frame almost anything so that your potential client finds it acceptable and even an attractive idea. Well, almost anything. Let's look at an example."

I have a friend who is South African. Could I ask if there are any South Africans here tonight?" He asked.

Several hands went up, "Well please forgive the terrible accent but it does kind of go with the story."

A few chuckles came from the crowd.

"My friend sold insurance and one day we were sharing a coffee at a local cafe. Something was bothering him, and after a bit of a silence he finally got it out and asked what had been preying on his mind."

With a pretty passable South African accent he continued, "Bill, he said, what's the matter with these people here? I try to sell them insurance, and they just don't buy!

"I asked, how are you trying to sell them on insurance and he said to me, with his big finger pointing straight at my face," 'I say to them - look, you need insurance!' The crowd laughed in understanding."

"Now here I have to tell you he was a very successful salesman in South Africa; obviously that approach works there, and it was working here among those that had emigrated from South Africa. But it wasn't working here with people that were used to a gentler approach. Would you buy?" Bill asked. Heads started shaking."

"So we talked about different ways he might approach different markets, and we worked on his approach. He tried a different approach. It went something like this..."

Bill continued in his South African accent and told the story as if he was his friend. "I am from South Africa, and I am selling insurance, and I have observed that New Zealanders have some ideas in their head about what that represents. What I have found is they think we are good at what we do; we work hard and do a good job. But if they had to pick a rugby scrum of someone to have their back in a tight spot, that we are the sort of people that would also be handy in that situation. The sort you would pick in a tight corner."

"You see the reason people tend to use me is not because of my rosy disposition and a nice smile. It is because if they have to make an insurance claim, they want someone who will get it paid for them. That is the real time we know if your insurance product and our advisor are any good. People use me for the simple reason that I will roll up my sleeves, walk into an insurance company and fight for them. I will walk out with whatever money I can get for them."

Bill dropped the accent and continued.

"You see, he had made a virtue out of being what he naturally was, a no-nonsense, intelligent guy that you may not invite around on Saturday but a great person to have on your side when you need him. How do you think his sales went from there? Today he is making good inroads into the local markets."

Bill paused, "Let me ask you – can you spot when someone is being fake? You can tell right away?"

The audience nodded in agreement.

"So do you think your customers might just be able to see that in you if you were to try to be something you're not?"

Looking around, Sam could see that this had caught the attention of a few and got them thinking. Some faces did not look too comfortable.

"Your clients will spot it immediately if you are a fake or not genuine. It doesn't matter what technique you use, what closes, what features you present, it's all about how genuine you are when you do it."

"Nor do they have to work out why they feel uncomfortable about this – they just do – and they react by moving away from you and your offering. It is quite possibly one of the easiest ways to lose your rapport and connection with a client."

"Framing like this allows you to reposition who you naturally are and so many of the things that you try to hide. It is very powerful. Would you like another example of framing?"

The audience made it very obvious that they did.

"Ok then. Suppose you are a pretty new at sales. You have worked on your product knowledge but you are young and green, and the clients do not seem to be accepting you. Maybe you are trying too hard or using a new script that you are still getting to know or do not really like. It is not working. It is not you."

"One thing you could do would be to approach the client completely differently. How about something like this?"

In yet another theatrical voice, Bill started to relate the approach.

"Mr Client, I am pretty new here, but I am not slow. My job is to make you happy enough with whatever you are interested in that you buy one, and I am willing to counter newness with a heap of enthusiasm to make that happen.

"Now I have done my homework – read the files, talked to some of the key people here, looked at your buying trends, and I can see some gaps between what you get and what we supply. But, I do not know your business like you. You will have reasons you buy some things from us and not others. It occurs to me that making assumptions about those reasons could be a really bad, and possibly arrogant, idea."

"How do you feel about spending a short time looking at some of my ideas and areas and telling me why we do not stack up, so I get it and also focus on the areas you want to focus on?"

Jaws were dropping in the audience.

Bill dropped his voice and continued, "You see, you can reframe a supposed weakness into a perfectly acceptable approach. Can you see how credible that new person has become in the eyes of the client? How entirely honest and forthright he has been?"

Again there was nodding throughout the crowd.

Sam suddenly realised that Bill was not saying he was not cut out to be a salesperson. Rather, he was saying that if Sam was to succeed he needed to become the salesperson called 'Sam'. He needed to focus on being as good as he could be and use all that to his advantage. He was going to have to figure out exactly what that meant, but he was suddenly pretty sure it did not include wearing himself out trying to be all things to all people.

There was a long moment of silence when suddenly he snapped his focus back to the stage and noticed Penny looking at him as she had noticed his thoughtfulness.

"So the take home from tonight is to be yourself, be genuine and make a virtue of who you naturally are! You cannot be anyone else. It is about framing your natural abilities to a client so that they can see the advantage in working with you as who you are."

Once again he had stopped on stage and paused to ensure he had all their attention. "Being real gets the deal...Being real is one of the R's we use to help people make the transition to being much more successful in the area of sales. The rest will have to wait for another day, but they are equally valuable. I have left a brief overview and an offer to buy a book for those interested."

"If anyone would like to talk to me further, I have left a few cards on the table near the door, or you can fill out the small request form you will find on each seat. There is a box by the entrance you can place them in or please feel free to hand them to me directly. My email is also on the board."

Bill thanked the audience and bowed as they applauded.

He picked up his trumpet and left the stage.

Sam headed for the table and was pleased to be quick enough to grab a card, although the handouts had all disappeared.

"That was great," he said smiling as he took Penny's hand.

"I think that's the first time I have seen you smile in months," Penny said happily.

Sam's face clouded over as he remembered the unfinished tender sitting on his desk. He would have to get up early to get it done. But how would he start to do things differently? For the first time in a long time Sam felt a positive feeling about going to work.

Chapter 3

"Hello Sam," it was Tony, and Sam didn't have time to talk but felt he had to.

"How did you enjoy last night?"

"It was good to have a break," Sam replied.

"I was wondering if you would like to meet Bill James, I am having coffee with him next week, and you can come along if you want to?"

"I am so busy," he replied, which was the truth, "I have to get this tender into the city on Monday morning, which means I will have to work through the weekend."

"You seemed pretty interested the other night. Didn't take long for work to crowd you in did it?" Sam did a double take. Tony was right.

"Well, I am meeting him in the city at ten on Monday morning if you want to come along."

Sam thought for a moment he was going to be in the city anyway and how long could a coffee take? And he realised he really did want to.

"Sure," he said, "I'll join you."

"Great," replied Tony, "I will email you the address of the coffee shop, see you at ten."

Sam hung up, and looked at the phone, the initial inspiration he had felt during the evening had worn off, but he knew there was something in what Bill had said. He was looking forward to seeing Bill again, but he wasn't quite sure why.

Sam enjoyed not setting his alarm and was not surprised he woke at 8am instead of his usual 6am. He had needed to sleep.

After a shower, he had gone down to the kitchen to find the Saturday activities were well under way. He had earned a swift rebuke from his daughter Jess when he asked about ballet. It seemed that netball was now the new thing and her look said he should have known. And she was right. He was suddenly aware how out of touch he had become with his family. At least Paul's rugby uniform meant he was on safe ground, although he only received a grunt of acknowledgement when he tried to make conversation.

"Must go," he said to Penny, getting up from the table and kissing her on the cheek, already thinking about the tender waiting on his desk at work. At least there wouldn't be any interruptions on a Saturday, and he could get lots of work done.

By the time he got to work, he had pretty much planned out his day. If everything went well, he could take some time off tomorrow to spend with the family, something he hadn't done for a while.

He was surprised to find the door to the workshop open and someone welding behind one of the protective partitions. He waited until the sparks stopped flying and looked around the corner. It was Art Searle, the fabrication supervisor.

"Hello Art," he said in greeting, "surprised to see you here on a Saturday, I thought all overtime was banned."

Art Searle had been with the company for longer than Sam, he was a bit of an institution in himself. If there were a company barbeque or team in a fun run, Art would have organised it.

He flipped up his welding helmet, black smudges on his face that told Sam he had been working a while. He smiled, pleased to see someone else on a Saturday.

"Morning Sam, got to get this finished, due out first thing Monday and since when did supervisors get overtime?" He laughed.

"Same here," said Sam as he turned to climb the stairs, "Tender due in on Monday morning, will probably be here all day."

Sam sat at his desk, feeling his planning for the day evaporate as he became overwhelmed by the piles of paper. He fought the urge to just leave it and go home and sat down and stared at it for a few minutes, wondering where to start. He switched on his computer and leaned back in his chair closing his eyes and tried not to think about anything. He opened his eyes and noticed his email program open with a list of new emails. He arched his eyebrows as the list kept growing, before finally shuddering to a halt.

He blinked at the list and wondered if he could just press 'delete' but knew there would be important information in there. He took a deep breath and started to scan the list only clicking on those he felt might be the most important. It took Sam nearly an hour to work through them, and by the time he closed his email, his neck was stiff from being hunched over his keyboard.

He stretched and lifted the pile of papers for the tender from its file and started going through them. It was heavy going. Sam shook his head and stood up deciding to go and see how Art was doing. The company had a rule that no one could work alone in the workshop, so he wanted to check on him, although really he knew that he was looking for an excuse not to tackle the painful job of getting the tender documents together.

Sparks were flying from behind the screen, so he walked past not pausing to look in. Instead, he walked out of the side door which was propped open and stood in the sun. Sam wondered how Paul was doing with his rugby practice; he couldn't remember when he had last taken him. He bit his lip and went back inside determined to get the job finished so he could take tomorrow off; it would be good to be home with the family.

He became immersed in the tenders and worked through lunch. He started on the bill of materials, pricing out the different sections and plate thicknesses for the tender he was working on.

He could not find the costings and so emptied the file out and leaned forward sifting through the leaves of paper, turning them over and checking every piece looking for the missing estimates. Desk drawers and other files followed with no result.

He stood up shaking his head; they must still be in estimating! He breathed deeply and left his office walking along the mezzanine towards 'estimating'.

Something was odd, he couldn't quite think what it was, but something wasn't right. Then it struck Sam that there were no flashes and sparks coming from the welding bays.

He headed towards the welding bay, expecting that Art was merely having a break, or was in the toilet.

He rounded the corner of the partitions and found Art clutching his hand to his chest.

"Are you ok?" he asked, his own voice shaky.

"Cut my hand," Art replied, "Grinder jumped and cut right through the glove."

Art still had his glove on with blood seeping out of the cut in the leather forming a spreading stain across the chest of his overalls.

"I'll get the car, I'm taking you to the hospital," said Sam as he turned and ran to his car and drove it right into the workshop. He opened the door for Art, who slumped down in the seat looking pale. Sam fastened his seat belt and jumped back in. He didn't pay any attention to the speed limit signs and was soon at the hospital's emergency entrance.

"I need help here!" he said, running through the door and grabbing an orderly by the arm.

"There's been an accident, he's in my car!" he blurted out, leading the man outside.

An orderly arrived and lifted Art from the car, placing him in a wheelchair.

"Are you alright?" asked the orderly giving Sam a quick appraisal Sam nodded, his mouth feeling dry.

"You better sit down," said the orderly, who left and returned a minute later with a plastic cup of water.

"Is he going to be ok?" Sam asked.

"I am not handling his treatment, but I do need to ask you some questions," he replied.

Sam responded in a daze as the orderly wrote the answers down. "His wife's name is Mary," said Sam in response to a particular question "but I don't know their address or home number. Sorry. I suppose his manager would," he replied, "And I think I have his phone number."

"Thank you," said the orderly, heading towards the nurses' station. "You're lucky it is a light day. We will be with him real soon."

Sam placed his hands over his eyes and slumped in the chair. He felt shattered. He didn't remember moving to a couch or falling asleep, but when he woke it was getting dark outside. He felt awful.

As he retrieved a coffee from the vending machine, he asked the nurse behind the desk if there was any update on Art. "I brought him in....," he glanced at his watch, "... hours ago."

The nurse looked at the computer.

"He was discharged half an hour ago," she replied.

"Thanks," said Sam, glancing again at his watch. Six o'clock so no point going back to work now. He would have to go in tomorrow to get the tender finished. At least Penny would be pleased to see him home.

"Daddy," shouted Jess, excitedly from the dining table as he walked in.

"Jess," he replied, "Was the netball good?"

Penny got up from the table and Sam noticed there was no place set for him, when did that start happening? Jess nodded and smiled as he sat down at the vacant space at the table, while Penny arrived back with a plate of dinner. "We weren't expecting you," she said, clearly happy he was home.

During dinner, he caught up on family life and Penny about the accident. Penny knew Mary Searle and said she would call her the next day.

Sam slept with his phone beside the pillow so he could grab it and turn off the alarm before it could wake Penny. He crept out of the bedroom, and within a half hour, he was at work.

Picking up where he left off, Sam searched through the files in the Estimating office, but couldn't find any coating estimates at all.

He decided to call George Calder, the senior estimator. He had to have the estimates to complete the tender and George would know where they were; why were these things always such a rush?

The phone rang and rang, finally going to voicemail.

"Probably gone fishing!" he muttered under his breath. He went back to his office and sat staring at the tender forms.

He wrote in a figure for coatings and continued with the next part of the tender. By just after lunchtime, he was finished.

He read through the document, pausing at the coatings figure.

"Since when did I start making up figures?" he asked himself, before turning the page uncomfortably.

He pressed the print button and sat back feeling relieved. He went and made himself a coffee while he waited for the printer to warm up and produce the document.

He enjoyed sipping the coffee and even took the time to look through last Friday's newspaper before he went to the printer, where he found an error message flashing on the status screen. It read, 'OUT OF TONER'.

He opened the stationary cupboard, but not only was the first box empty, so was the second and third.

Sam turned off the printer and went back to his office. Packing up his laptop, he headed home; he knew what he had to do.

"You're home – and in time for lunch!" said Penny excitedly, as he came through the door.

"Yes," he replied, "Just need to print off something, and I'm finished for the day!"

"You will have to fight with Jess for the printer; she's making butterflies, in all sorts of designs and colours."

Jess was also pleased to see him; she relinquished the printer and gathered up her pages into a pile before sitting in the corner of the room cutting them out with some scissors.

Sam plugged his computer into the printer and sent the document to print.

"They are really pretty," he said to Jess, looking at the butterflies. She smiled and stood up presenting him with one, which she had printed 'Daddy' on. He smiled and was genuinely touched that his daughter had taken the trouble to include him.

Sam settled into lunch and, for the first time in what seemed like forever, relaxed and enjoyed time with his family. The two children opened up, and he caught up on rugby and netball, school and the latest trials of youth. His wife's smile was a pleasure as he realised he just had to make time for this.

He was smiling as, later in the afternoon, he went back to check on the printing.

He had not reacted well to the realisation that the pages were...not right somehow. The first two pages were fine then the printing began to fade, and by the tenth page, the printing was a light grey at best.

They were out of black ink.

The joy of the afternoon evaporated, and in desperation and anger, he had stormed through the house racing against time to get to the supplier before they closed. He had said some unkind words to his daughter about using all the ink on 'her stupid butterflies' that had earned scowls from both Jess and Paul. As he drove home with the last ink cartridges in the shop, he reflected on a low point as a father. He would have to apologise to Jess. He stopped at a petrol station and bought a bar of chocolate for her and one for Paul as a token gesture.

It was a little after 7 p.m. when he finished printing the tender and reread it again. The coating costings still bothered him. It was like he was reading something written by a stranger. He ignored the voice that was gnawing at him and placed the tender into an envelope, which he put in his car, just to make sure he didn't forget it in the morning.

The family didn't seem to be talking to him, and the chocolate bars sat untouched on the kitchen table, but at least the tender was finished! He could not help but feel there was something wrong with the way the priorities of his life were lining up at the moment.

Chapter 4

Traffic in the city was always bad in the morning and the tender needed to be deposited in the tender box by 9 a.m.

Even leaving early, Sam only just made it on time.

Sam was inching his way forward when he remembered he was supposed to meet Tony and Bill for a coffee. It was on the way and decided to make the detour to meet them. After a lucky car park find Sam ran into the café, hoping he wasn't too late.

"Sam, good to see you again," said Bill, smiling and reaching for Sam's hand to shake.

Sam was surprised and gratified that Bill remembered his name and he hoped the tension he felt didn't show in his voice, as he shook Bill's hand.

"Coffee, or some breakfast?" asked Tony.

"Just a coffee," he replied, pleased that Tony had offered as he sat and started to get his breath back...

"You look like you had a bit of a rush to get here," said Bill.

"Nowhere to park," Sam replied starting to relax.

"And you had a tender to drop off?" Bill asked him.

"That too," he said, smiling at Bill's attentiveness. To Sam it seemed like the first chance in ages to just stop and sip his coffee, which he should have realised would be too hot. "I liked the trumpet story," he said to Bill.

"Thank you. It gets people thinking," Bill replied.

"With the huge workload on people today, it's very hard to be true to yourself," said Sam, blowing gently across the surface of his coffee.

"Very true," said Tony, "But that's only part of it; isn't that right Bill?" Bill nodded.

In response to Sam's puzzled look, Bill continued. "Can I ask you a question Sam? Do you like selling?"

"Well, I don't dislike selling, but it has its challenges, and there are days I would rather be an engineer," replied Sam.

"Exactly." replied Bill "Even hardened super salespeople have some aspect that they do not like or lack confidence and skills in

"You see," Bill continued, "it is not enough to know what to do – you have to want to do it. Even the best in sales have sticking points that they find very hard to get past. It could be cold calling, handling a price objection, closing the business or any one of a number of areas. The combination of fear in these areas and often outdated sales techniques can sabotage their efforts."

"If you are to succeed in sales you have to accept that you are in sales. You have to accept you are in the role before you can progress further. Many people fight this and find many reasons why sales do not work for them. By accepting that you are in sales, even if you do not like sales, allows you to start looking for better ways to do things."

"As an analogy, if you do not believe you are in water, there is no reason to learn to swim better. Once you accept that you are floating in water and floundering you are open to ideas on how to swim better. To be honest with you Sam I do not think this is your problem – you know you are in sales!" Sam certainly knew his role. Bill was right.

"To help you connect and be successful, we add a level of 'hard-edged soft skills' that are easy to understand and action and that those same people want to use. They feel comfortable to work with and give confidence."

"We think you can achieve most 'sales from within your comfort zone'. It is very customer focused and based on honesty and open conversation. It is really all about respecting the other person, their needs and understanding where they are coming from.

"So what does that mean?" asked Sam, finding it hard to grasp.

Bill replied, "A major factor is that what we do is not a replacement for the sales process you use – it is an overlay that will make it so much more successful. When you apply a sales process without understanding yourself and the person you are dealing with, it just doesn't work as often. The soft skills make the sales process actually work. They are hard-edged soft skills for hard sales situations."

"We work with a number of **R's** to demonstrate how you can do this. You heard about the first when you saw me present. It was about being **REAL**. Did that make sense to you?" asked Bill.

"Yes it did," replied Sam. "So there are other R's?"

"Sure. A second R is how you **RELATE** to people and the process of selling. It is vital," said Bill.

"That's almost a no-brainer," added Tony, "If you don't relate, you don't do business."

Sam frowned trying to think how he could relate to someone on the other end of an email exchange who he had never met.

"Okay. What do you mean by relate?" He asked.

"Having an emotional or personal connection, having them recognise your face and appreciate having you around. Make a deeper connection at the personal level." Bill replied.

"Sam, do you ever present a great document to a potential customer that you think hits all the right notes, but when you ask them to commit they tell you they will think about it?" asked Bill. Sam thought about it and had to admit it did happen.

"The thing is that you have shown them you are a good option – at a logical and practical level. What is missing is a feeling that they should act on your information. You have educated them, but not inspired them to action. Maybe it is about you understanding what is at stake here for the company but also the potential gain or loss for the person you are dealing with. Do you understand what will make them take action beyond simply providing a business level option?"

"The logical side of us will open the mind – but it is the personal and emotional side is that convinces us to take action."

"Let me give you a simple example of how our personal side will impact something as simple as an email." continued Bill.

"Suppose you receive an email from someone you do not want to hear from as you are worried about what it contains, or maybe you simply do not like them. It could be anyone in authority or a difficult client for example."

"You decide when you will open that email. Do you ever put off opening it for a while to put off what you may find?"

"I guess so," replied Sam, thinking of one particular email he knew he had to deal with today that came in yesterday.

With a small knowing smile, Bill said "That is not a logical reaction. Logically we should open it and deal with it as leaving it only makes things worse. But emotionally we put it off. Your emotional reaction has overridden your logical mind. It happens all the time."

Sam asked for a minute to scribble down a few notes and added the email he had been putting off at the top of the page. He would have to think this through and might pull out a couple of recent presentations to have a look at them from a different angle. He already knew what he would find.

The interesting thing was what he heard made sense. Not at a logical level. It just felt right.

"But how can you relate when you haven't met someone in person?" Sam asked.

"Well let's look at your tender again; do you know the name of the person you were dealing with?" Bill asked. Sam opened his mouth to answer and then realised that he couldn't remember it, it had been so easy to just click on the last email and hit reply!"

Bill looked at Sam sympathetically, "Don't worry; you would be surprised how many people can't tell you anything about the people they deal with."

"Yes, but they aren't the successful ones," said Tony.

"It's hard sometimes to relate," said Sam.

"Is it?" Bill asked and then added, "Did I greet you by name when you arrived and did I recall why you were in the city?"

"Yes," said Sam.

"How did it make you feel – that I had remembered and mentioned those details when we met today?" asked Bill.

"Good," he replied.

"Did it help us re-establishing a connection? Like I was relating to you?" Bill prompted him.

"Yes," said Sam.

"Was that hard for me to do?" Bill asked.

Sam shrugged his shoulders and noticed Tony smiling, and he wondered why.

"I will tell you a secret," said Bill lowering his voice and leaning slightly towards Sam.

"I asked Tony to remind me of your name and what you were doing in town." He paused and then added, "And that helped me relate to you, so it wasn't hard at all."

Sam smiled; he could see how that had not been hard to do and how he could do the same. Relating wasn't that hard.

Bill continued, "So greeting you by name and knowing why you were in the city was about relating to you and that means connecting at an emotional level. If I had greeted you with, 'and what was your name again?' there would have been no emotional response, no real engagement. When you relate to them, then people like being around you."

"Please don't think this is about manipulation because I would always try and make it personal greeting anyway, but it does also make a better connection."

Sam nodded, "It almost feels like I am back at school," he said. "But how do you go deeper than a name?"

Tony beamed and jumped straight in. "I found this hard but once you think it through it is actually really easy. Since I started this I have found many ways to learn more about someone, such as contacting the receptionist, their Executive Assistant, research the company's office to learn about the business, looked at their website to find testimonials and case studies or their latest news, social media, asked other people I already know that know them, and a whole heap of other places. It is amazing where you can go to find out more information."

"Now when I go into an office I really look around. There are clues everywhere; from photos to trophies, from sports memorabilia to model cars on the desk. It is amazing how easy it is to find ways to connect."

Sam sat wide-eyed, thinking and taking it all in. Maybe it really was not so hard now that he gave it some thought.

"I should mention that different people prefer different levels of connection," continued Bill. "It is usually accepted that there are four personality types – and I seriously suggest it is worth looking into as it provides great insights into how and why people buy. But to keep this at a simple and easy to use level, and recognising that this is pretty basic, you could divide people into logically driven and emotionally driven as a basic first step."

"Those you approach that are highly logically driven will want to keep the conversation at a business level. How could you be relevant to them?"

This time Sam thought he had it. "I guess you would be relevant by getting to the point more quickly. You know, less chat and more direct. I meet a lot of these types when I am working on RFP's and tenders. They always get to the point and want figures, details and a fully worked presentation set out in their format. I am guessing they are the ones that spot typos and spelling errors."

"Certainly some of them are. That's a great start. You will soon judge how people want to relate to you. Simply respond in a way that suits their style of communication. Let's see. If someone was social and wanted to converse at a more personal level, what sort of mannerisms would you expect?" Bill asked.

Sam looked lost, so Tony chimed in. "These people are inclined towards conversation. They want to know about you and the company. They want to get to know you a bit before they go on. They also tend to want to talk options through. Their desks are usually more cluttered..."

"Whoah!" said Bill "Someone has been reading up on personality types! Well done. Look Sam, the emotional type of person is always more chatty and ready to engage at a personal level. Some are more interested in telling you about themselves, and others really need to know who they are dealing with to be comfortable working with you. But make no mistake, even the most logical person judges you at an emotional level first.

"It is simply how humans are put together – we are hard-wired to 'feel' about something before we 'think' about something. It is a basic function of the older part of our brain. The one that controls the 'fight or flight' reflex. We form opinions and feelings about something without even realising we are doing it. But once we have, everything they receive goes through that filter."

"So, if I get a negative feeling about you or your company, then whatever you present after that has got to fight hard to not be seen with doubt. I am now looking for fault. If I have a good first impression, then I tend to look for the good in your suggestions."

"If you are ready for some more, there are a couple of legs still to go. The next "R" is **RELEVANCE**," said Tony. Sam had not heard the silence. He had been lost in thought but came back into focus now.

"While the first two legs have a strong component of emotional connection, the next one is more logically based," said Bill.

"But what does that mean exactly, what is being relevant?" asked Sam.

"Relevance is about addressing the needs of the person you are relating to, the one you are being real with and showing respect to. It is about having something to talk about that is in their minds right now, and that has importance to them at a business, and quite possibly a personal level. It allows you to grab their attention within seconds. In a busy world with limited time to spare they will judge quickly whether they want to listen to you or not, so you really do have only seconds to connect."

"For instance, is this conversation relevant to you? Does it make sense to you right now and is it the right time to hear this stuff?" asked Bill.

Sam thought for a moment and then nodded, "I guess so, or I wouldn't be here," he replied.

Tony laughed; "Nor would I," he said, "if I hadn't gotten my sales act together, I probably wouldn't be in sales now. What Bill has to say has been very relevant to me, which is why I invited you to join us today."

"Quite so Tony. But Sam, you are under time pressure as I recall, and you could be working on some presentation right now. I bet there was an element of scepticism in your mind about what you might find when you got here too wasn't there?" Sam nodded.

Bill continued "so you are here because you hoped you might find some solutions to your current challenges. It was relevant enough to you to give up precious time, and I owe it to you to give you the value you need to justify that time. I need to respect that."

"People are time poor these days and if you take their time just to do a simple catch up and fact find; you could get quite a negative reaction. They often just do not have the time," said Bill.

"On the other hand, if you compel them to listen within the first minute because your conversation is in line with something that is of importance to them, you will find a warm response waiting."

Sam shared a thought. "So how do you become relevant to a potential customer? They are not always so forthcoming, especially with tenders and processes that happen at arm's length?"

"Great question, Sam. What have you found Tony?" Bill asked.

"I have to say it was hard at first but then a couple of ideas really worked. Firstly I found that it is a small world. As part of the research I was doing on the client, I simply started to ask different questions and look for different clues. Newspaper articles, the internet, the receptionist, suppliers, other people in their organisation ALL give you information and clues."

"I started asking about the stress the person might be under that I was going to see, about whether they wanted very factual information or were they the type of person that wanted to get to know me first. It was useful finding out about whom they reported to and what they were like, how important the job I was quoting on was and what was at stake."

"You know, the interesting thing I found," continued Tony, "was that it was the personal stakes that mattered as much as the business need. When I started taking into account what the individual had to gain or lose I started to get a better connection. They opened up and shared much more valuable information. I was giving them what they needed to be comfortable in trusting me."

"Nice observation – and very important," said Bill. "Tell me Sam, do you know anything about your clients along those lines?" Sam had to confess that he did not. He tried to defend this based on a lot of his work being at arm's length, but Tony was in the same situation, and he was succeeding in presenting ideas that hit both aspects.

"The last "R" is for **REPUTATION**," said Bill.

This time Bill just carried on. "Reputation is all about the feeling of reliability and trust that precedes you. When we impact at all these levels and deliver what we promise, we bring the client to the conclusion they can trust our reliability; especially when we do this over multiple interactions."

"What is your track record? Do you have the solid credibility that they need in order to rely on you? Remember, their reputation, possibly even their job rides on the decision to trust you with the contract. Put simply – can they rely on you?"

"We talked about setting a positive frame. Your reputation is the frame that exists when you are not around. It is what people say behind your back. This is waiting for you before you even start a conversation and can be the most powerful frame of all."

A lot is determined by the organisation in terms of how they conduct PR, articles written about them, and other active image creation. But a lot is also at your doorstep to control. How did you treat them last time you dealt with them? What feeling and impression did your last tender leave with them?"

"That just makes sense. That is something we automatically do so that's good," said Sam.

"Absolutely; but did you relate it to the person running the tender, so it related to them or did you just rattle out the same old material. You know – cut and paste style? They can tell, you know. Did you use their language and phrases in the tender or stick to your jargon? Did you put your best into it so that even if you do not get the result you hoped for, you still build on your reputation?" said Bill.

That gave Sam an awkward moment.

But Sam was warming to the topic now and punctuated what he said by pointing his finger in front of him. "So if you do the four R's well you get results!"

"You get results even if you don't do the four R's well," said Tony.

Bill smiled; it hadn't taken Tony long to catch on to the four R's, and it looked like Sam was learning quickly too. Time and again it struck Bill that people have to be ready to hear what he had to say. If there was no pain recognised, people usually were not really interested in looking for a new idea to try.

"It's just that the results you get might not be the kind you want. Losing a tender is a result, as much as winning one is," said Bill.

A shiver ran through Sam as he thought about the tender he had just delivered, not a kilometre from where they were sitting. He knew he hadn't applied even one of the R's in handling it, and he had a sinking feeling that he already knew what the result would be.

"You have touched on another 'R' that has real merit as well," continued Bill. "RESULTS is something that should be obvious to all, but it is not always so. There are many who build a relationship with a client and forget that the purpose of doing so is to get a result. A 'sale'.

"They spend time and energy in the hope that one day the prospect may actually ask them to sell them something. You owe it to yourself and your business to remember that it is all about the end result and know when to move on."

Sam understood the point but realised he hardly ever created a relationship, let alone held on to one too long. His limited time meant that he bounced reactively from one opportunity to the next, often not following up as he should.

"A well-presented tender is a result, even if you don't win it. It tells the company that you had enough respect for them to do your best. That can influence how they look at you next time," said Tony.

"Having all the R's in place de-risks your interaction with the company both for them and for you," said Bill.

Bill could see that Sam was looking a lot better than when he arrived.

Ok," said Sam, "Real, Relating, Relevance and Reputation."

He continued, "What the four R's, taken all together give you is actually another 'R', and that's **RELATIONSHIP**.

You will build the relationship, and it will put you in a better position now and the next time. Or they might point you in the right direction for another possible job."

Bill paused to see if Sam looked like he had had enough for one day, but he still looked keen, so he kept talking.

"And in tenders, as in most things, there are two components; the logical and the emotive. The 'real' and the 'relating' are the emotional sides. The 'relevance' and the 'reliability' are the logical sides. Most think they do the logical side well, but few actually perform at anything but a surface level. However, it's the emotive side that I usually find is missing and it almost always influences the ease of the decision process."

Sam frowned, "Surely when it comes to tenders it's mostly about the logical; all they are interested in is the technical stuff and the price." He paused and then added, "Mostly the price!"

"It might appear that way, but there is also the impression they have of you and your company and the way you interact with them," said Bill.

"Dale Carnegie said some decades ago that 85% of the buying decision is emotional and this holds true in today's market. If people don't trust you, they will interpret everything you say and do differently than when they do trust you," said Bill.

"So, it's about the logical *and* the emotional aspects of the sales process," Sam repeated as if he was trying to commit it to memory.

"You might think of it as the hard stuff, or the facts, and the soft stuff, or how people feel about things," said Bill, trying to clarify the terms.

"So the concrete....," said Sam, tailing off the sentence.

"Is about 'things' and can be logically argued," finished Bill.

"And the emotive is about feelings," Tony added, pleased that he could contribute.

Bill smiled, "I assume that as an engineer you are on top of the logical stuff?"

"Yes," said Sam hesitantly, as he thought about the tender he had just delivered; he wasn't sure he had really been on top of the logical stuff in his work on the tender. He thought he had been relevant and shown reliability but now realised he had indeed cut and pasted almost all of it. He wondered if he had just ticked the boxes without ticking the boxes that really mattered to the tender manager.

"Ouch," said Sam, noticing the clock on the wall, "I must get going, too much to do."

"Before you go," said Bill, "I am presenting a seminar for some of my clients as a kind of a 'thank you'. You are welcome to come along if you think it would be useful. It covers a lot of this again, but you might find the refresher useful once you have tried a few of these ideas, and I always try and throw in a few new things you may not have already heard. It's scheduled for next week. I'll send you an invitation if you like?"

"Thanks," he said as a reflex, but his mind was already thinking about the next tender and what the traffic would be like on the way back to the office.

Chapter 5

Robert Portman looked at his watch and frowned, he wasn't happy being at work so late. He stared at the figures on the spreadsheet on the screen in front of him and ran another graph. The projections didn't look good; at this rate, they would be out of business in six months if the bank didn't play ball. He would have to get the team together and let them know how critical things were. He hoped word wouldn't get out; otherwise, they would start to lose their trade suppliers and the confidence of the customers they had and that really would be the end.

The email read: Meeting 10 a.m. – GM's Office.

Sam hoped the meeting wouldn't take long; he had a lot of work to do today and could do without the distraction of a talkfest. He pulled out the tender's folder and opened it to the first page. The wording leapt off the page at him, he had copied the capability statement from another tender and hadn't had time to read it. It made reference to things which were irrelevant to this tender and left out others, which were relevant.

He winced and mentally kicked himself; he hoped there were no more mistakes as he turned the pages. He glanced at the financial breakdowns and had an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he saw the figure he had put in for coatings. He fired off an email to 'Estimating' asking where their estimates were; he hoped they were not too far off what he had guessed.

He was beginning to relax as he thought everything else was ok when he took a second look at the 'Certifications' section and did a double take. How could he be so stupid?

They had asked for details of welding certificates held, not the quality certification! What was the matter with him? Too easy to cut and paste and not read properly! He knew that it was enough to sabotage the tender and he was the one that had done it.

Robert had an office that doubled as the boardroom so it was often used for all kinds of meetings. All of the senior management team were there when Sam arrived. He slumped into the last remaining seat at the board table, still angry with himself about the mistakes he had made with the tender.

Robert looked up from his tablet computer and shared a less than warm smile upon the group. Looking at their faces, he could tell that they were used to meetings and most of them felt they had better things they could be doing. They might rank this one a bit higher when they heard what he had to say.

"Thank you for taking the time to come here on short notice," said Robert.

"You all know that times are tough," he paused, "and most of you have been through tough times before." He could see he had their attention, which was good because he was going to be brutally honest with them.

"Well this time it is more than tough," he said, "It's critical! If we don't start bringing in some serious contracts, the bank won't support us, and then we are all out of a job."

Every eye in the room was staring at him; he looked around the table making eye contact with each of them. There were many emotions looking back, but the most common one was worry. It reflected the feeling that had been building in all of them over the last few months.

"What can we do?" asked Ray Carter, the purchasing manager.

"We can keep down costs and I know you are already doing that and try and minimise overtime. But most of all we need sales and not just any sales, we need sales with a margin."

He glanced at Sam as he added the last words.

Sam tried to smile, but it wasn't easy. He was painfully aware of the pairs of eyes swivelling in his direction.

"If anyone has any ideas, I would like to hear them," said Robert, looking for a flicker of an idea in their faces.

"We have to do things differently," said Raj Patel, the Fabrication Manager. "I mean if things are not working as they are, we would be stupid to carry on with the status quo."

He looked around the room for support, and a few people nodded.

"We need to win more contracts," said Sam, his voice a little shaky. "And I mean fast landing business that is not tied down by long tender processes."

"Yes," said Robert pointedly. "Sam, I am aware that you are almost killing yourself now trying to get tenders in, but you are absolutely right. What more can we do?"

"Slow down," said Sam instinctively and without much thought. He just wanted to offer something to those worried faces. Now those faces looked back at him questioningly.

"And how does that help?" Ray asked.

"We need to spend more time on the tenders," Sam replied; then remembering something that Bill James said, he added, "and we need to take the time to build good relationships with the companies who are calling the tenders."

"Are you saying that you are going to give up on sleeping?" Robert asked, and then added, "Tenders are a numbers game Sam. Put in enough, and you pick up some. That's how it has always been. That is how sales work."

Sam wondered what Bill would say to that and it struck him how little knowledge on sales there was in the room. Sam returned to his office and sat at his desk, it was probably too late, but he opened his email and checked the name and contact details for the person who was the contact for the tender he had just delivered. He rehearsed what he was going to say, then picked up the phone and dialled.

He was ready; smile on face, jovial manner, opening line, everything prepared.

He listened to the phone ringing, and then a voice on the other end said, "Hello, Mark Mason speaking."

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out, finally, he managed to say, "Hello, Sam Porter here."

Something was stopping him, then he remembered Bill's words, he had to be himself, he had to be real.

"I am sorry to bother you Mark, but I have had another look at the tender we presented and realised I have not presented it as accurately as I could have. The simple fact is, with lots to do and not so much time to do it; I did not get all the figures correct. There is no excuse, but I wonder if it's possible to send you an amended copy? It doesn't affect the price," said Sam.

"Unfortunately Sam, they don't come to me, and the rules are pretty strict, no changes once submitted. But I appreciate you letting us know. It will make our job easier as we might have wasted time trying to understand something that was incorrect."

Sam nodded even though Mark couldn't see him. He felt deflated; it had been a long shot anyway.

"Oh well. I understand your position entirely, but it was worth the call. Thanks anyway," said Sam.

There was a moment's silence from the other end of the phone, and then Mark said, "Tell you what Sam. Your company has a good name in our market, and I appreciate you letting us know, not many would bother. If you email me details of what mistakes there are, I will make sure the review team knows."

Sam smiled, it wasn't perfect, but it was better than nothing and probably better than he deserved.

"Thank you. I would appreciate that," he said, meaning it.

"You are welcome Sam, good luck with the tender," Mark replied, before hanging up.

He sat back in his chair and reflected on what had just happened. He hadn't put on his practised 'sales' face. Instead he had just been himself, and the sky hadn't fallen in. In fact, he was quite happy with how the conversation went, all things considered. Maybe there was something to this. Being who he was had had a positive effect, especially on him! You have to be real!

What had Bill said? 'Being real gets the deal.'

He had a thought. It was about relationships, and he felt that he had just taken a step towards building one. What would Bill suggest as a follow-up? After a few thoughts, he sent a brief email thanking Mark again for his generosity and promising the additional information before days end.

That felt like the right thing to do as well.

It sprang into his mind with a flash. Mark had said that their company had a good name in their market. It had been a factor in him allowing the leeway of letting the decision-making team have the details of the wrong information. Reputation. There it was in action.

He focussed back on his desk and wondered if there was an elf that kept piling paper on it each night while he slept. Within ten minutes there were three neat piles of urgent, very urgent and 'can wait.' Everything else he placed into an empty cardboard box that had held reams of photocopier paper. Soon he started a second box. It seemed wrong to throw it away, but he had the feeling it would not get looked at again either.

He picked up the very urgent pile and separated out the three tenders that were due out that week. He quickly scanned each one sticking post-it notes of scribbled thoughts here and there.

He then scanned then, emailed them to estimating and head down to that department. He didn't want a repeat of the missing coating estimate to happen again.

He stood by the Estimating Manager Rod Hyndman's desk and waited until he looked up from his computer screen and raised his eyes questioningly.

"I have just sent you tenders for pricing," said Sam nodding at the screen.

Rod sighed, "I don't know who is going to do them; we have hardly any staff left here."

"The one I sent first is the most urgent and the biggest job," said Sam, "You heard what Robert said, we need sales!"

Rod looked around the room. "I will send it on to Bascar; he can get started on it when he finishes the coating quote for you."

"Too late," Sam replied, "that was due last week, I had to take a guess."

Rod's face fell, "I hope your guess was good," he said.
"So do I" Sam replied.

"I'll help Bascar after lunch, we'll try to get it done by tomorrow afternoon," said Rod.

"Thanks," said Sam, not feeling entirely confident.

He was back at his desk when Rebecca walked in; it was a habit she had that she never knocked. He smiled, even though he could do without being disturbed.

Rebecca sat down on the chair opposite his desk without being invited. She took out her notepad and tapped it with her finger.

"You said we need to have better relationships," she said.

"Yes," he replied, wondering where the conversation was going.

"We already have them," she said.

"We do?" he said, wrinkling his brow.

She nodded, "Robert knows most of the CEO's, and I know most of their executive assistants." She smiled in a self-satisfied way.

"But I don't" he replied, "and it's usually a contract manager that I need to know anyway."

She shrugged, "If you tell me a name I will get the EA to introduce you," she said, a very brief smile breaking her no-nonsense demeanour.

Sam blinked, was it really that simple? How didn't he know this before? He reached for the tender documents and wrote the name of the contract manager's name on a piece of paper, handing it to Rebecca.

"Just one name then?" she said. Sam knew a good deal when he heard it. Three more names followed.

"Thanks," he said, feeling a bit bewildered as she walked out the door. A raised eyebrow and a knowing look were sent his way as she left the room.

He spent the rest of the day cutting and pasting the details from previous proposal into the documents. He wasn't going to be caught rushing what was really the easiest bit to get right.

"It's all about respect," he said, as he copied the last piece into the first tender and then carefully re-read them to make sure they were correct. He noticed several places where a slight rewording of a phrase or a different way of presenting information, even a different order of information to fit the priorities of the client, would make all the difference. He made the changes and was surprised at the difference it made to the overall effect and approach.

He realised that Bill had been right; to produce something that was shoddy just screamed, 'I have no respect for you' at the person reading it. At least he could get this part right. Making the changes meant the person reading the document might very well feel that they had been listened to and that some thought and attention had gone into the presentation. He knew it would make him feel better if it was him – so he followed that instinct.

He had a flash of insight and pulled out the original tender documents and covering letters and reread them. It was easy to see it once you knew where to look. Each one had their own phrases and terminologies, different titles and ways of explaining what was needed.

Sam went through the responses again and customised the language and aligned the terminology to match.

He arrived home just in time for dinner, which was an achievement in itself. For the first time in a while he actually felt good about his day, despite the nightmare workload that would be there by the end of the week.

Chapter 6

"How on earth am I supposed to make something out of this?" asked Raj Patel, throwing his hands in the air, which was not something he was usually driven to do.

"What's wrong?" asked Sam, who had come in through the workshop roller door instead of the side door he usually entered from.

"That," said Raj, waving his hand at a huge pipe, "How can I possibly work with that!"

Sam looked closer at the offending pipe and winced.

"Is it usual to work with an oval pipe?"

"And that is the problem!" said Raj smacking his fist on the bench top. "We have to cut it and join it back together at an angle! It's going to take hours and hours to get it even half right, and it's going to look like some backyard amateur with a gas axe did it!"

Sam almost smiled, he hadn't heard Raj use terms like 'gas axe' before, he was always very precise in his language and would usually have said, 'cutting torch'.

"Why didn't we roll it ourselves?" asked Sam, recognising the job as one he had tendered on.

"Getting it pre-rolled from China was supposed to be cheaper. They didn't even roll it! Look at those crease marks on the surface!"

Sam sighed, he felt sorry for Raj, and he knew that the profit margin on this job had just been decimated by the extra labour costs required to fix the mess.

"We need to get decent jobs, Sam, where we aren't forced to cut corners to survive," said Raj, shaking his head.

Sam nodded, feeling an extra weight on his shoulders. "I will do what I can Raj," Sam said and turned to climb the stairs to his office. Despite the lousy start to the day, Sam got the tender done quickly and sent off in a courier bag.

The day took another dive though when he received an email from Robert asking to meet with Sam urgently.

"Morning Rebecca," he said as he passed her desk.

Sam took another deep breath as he placed his hand on the door handle to Robert's office.

"Good Morning Robert," he said in his sunniest voice.

"Morning Sam, have a seat please," said Robert.

Robert looked at Sam over the rims of his reading glasses.

"Sam, sometimes I spend my weekends playing golf. I play golf so I can socialise with our customers and suppliers, not all of them, but enough to keep our company name out there. That's part of my role," he said.

Robert fell silent for a moment.

"Yesterday I played with Victor Abram, the CEO of Caldecott Weir."

A shiver went down Sam's spine; that was the company where he had rushed the tender documents and made mistakes. "Sam it takes a long time to build a reputation and, do you know the fastest way to lose one?" Robert asked, with a pained look on his face.

Sam shook his head, not trusting himself to speak.

"You can lose a reputation a lot of ways, but the fastest is when people laugh at you," said Robert, "and that's what happened on Sunday!"

Sam frowned unsure why someone would laugh at their company.

"Why did they laugh at us?" he asked.

"Because you put in a tender price for the coatings that was less than the cost of the paint! They joked that we would definitely be getting the job because no one else came close to us on price!"

The blood drained from Sam's face as he remembered making up the figure.

"Who in estimating do I have to fire?" asked RP.

"No one," said Sam, "It was my fault, estimating didn't get the price to me, so I had to guess a number."

Robert closed his eyes and threw his head back.

"Sam, you know how tough things are; we can't afford to win jobs that we take a loss on, and we can't afford to be laughed at. What am I supposed to do?"

Sam had a sinking feeling in his stomach and began to wonder how he was going to tell Penny that he had lost his job. Robert looked at him for what seemed like an age.

"Sam, we can't afford any more mistakes, do you understand what I mean?" RP asked.

"Yes Robert, no more mistakes" he answered, feeling only slightly relieved.

Rebecca was still absorbed in her work as he left. He was determined not to let Robert down again as he returned to his office.

Sam immersed himself in the next tender paying special attention to every detail and thinking about what the client would focus on and why.

He had a lot on his mind and almost missed the email from Bill James, inviting him to the seminar he had mentioned before. Sam would have ignored the email, but something Bill said stopped him. The word 'respect' flashed into his mind. Bill had personally invited him and the least he could do was to think about going.

The seminar was only an hour long, plus an opportunity to network. It was during breakfast but if Robert could network while playing golf, then perhaps Sam could do this.

He replied to the email, accepting the invitation and immediately felt better. Sam opened the 'Pending tenders' file and began to wonder how he was going to give each one the attention they needed.

Some of them were not exactly their core business, but it was a numbers game of 'put in many and you always pick up a few'. Or was it? What if there was more to it than relating to the customer? If they were relevant to the customer shouldn't they also be relevant to the work they tendered?

Sam dialled Bill's number hoping he wouldn't mind the intrusion.

"Bill James."

For a second Sam didn't know what to say.

"Bill, he said eventually "it's Sam, Sam Porter, Tony's friend. I hope you don't mind me calling."

"Hello Sam. I'm looking forward to seeing you at the seminar, I'm glad you can come along," said Bill.

"Thanks for inviting me" Sam replied, "I was just thinking about what you said about relevance and was wondering if it works the other way? Should I be making sure the work we do is relevant to us?" asked Bill.

"Sure. It makes sense to work to your strengths. Have you actually looked at what you do well and compared it to the tenders you get?" asked Bill.

"Not yet, but I am starting to think I need to," Sam replied, "I just had to ask."

"Well, I certainly think so. Why do you ask?" asked Bill.

"I am going to go through all the tenders we have won in the last year and see which really suited us," said Sam.

"And then you are going to compare what you do well, against the tenders you are responding to right now?" said Bill.

"Yes," replied Sam.

"And then what?" asked Bill

"Put more effort into the jobs we really want that we have succeeded at in the past and made money on?" Sam asked hesitantly.

"Make sure you dig a bit deeper into why they worked. Spotting the right ones is easier if you really understand why. I would probably ask the customers too." Bill replied.

Sam hadn't thought of asking the customers.

"That's a great idea." he said, "I am so pleased I called you!"

"Sam," Bill continued "if you can discover the reasons companies really buy you, then you have also found reasons that people would pay more for what you offer. You can move away from a price war and towards a value proposition. That would be great for your margins."

"From the other end make sure you understand what makes money. There is no point winning something to keep the workshops busy if you are not making a profit. The numbers always tell a story. Now free to call again if you need me."

Sam thanked him and sat at his desk digesting what he had just heard. So this could be an answer to finding more margin as well?

It wasn't going to be easy. He would have to take the 'Tenders Won' files home, which Penny wouldn't like, but he had to find the time to do this. It was important for the business and himself. Sam wasn't under any illusion about what would happen if he made another big mistake.

Chapter 7

Penny had not been happy when Sam arrived home with the file. He was left mostly to himself and poured over a notebook until he fell asleep. Sam woke early with a sore neck.

Sam made himself a coffee and looked again at the clock on the wall and decided to make one for Penny, it was the least he could do after last night, and then he needed to get an early start on the day if he was going to get to Bill's seminar on time.

Traffic was not as bad as he had expected, though he had forgotten to put the address into the GPS, so he nearly got lost despite the fact he thought he knew the area.

He found Bill laying out nametags on a table.

"Hello Bill," Sam said reaching for his nametag.

"Hello Sam, great to see someone keen enough to get here early," said Bill, shaking Sam's hand.

"The traffic was much lighter than I thought it would be," Sam replied.

"So how is the family?" Bill asked.

"Ok, I guess," Sam replied, "Just wish I had more time to spend with them."

"Balance in life is important," said Bill, "Which is why we need to make things like sales really work, so we don't have to steal the hours we should be spending at home. Work hard on both those areas Sam."

Sam nodded. The way he was doing his job was stealing hours that really belonged to his family.

"How are you going with the relationships with the people you are tendering to?" Bill asked, while carefully arranging some printed articles beside the name tags. Sam glanced at the title on one of them; it said 'Ask for Permission.' Bill noticed him reading it.

"You can take a copy if you like. It's all about the impact of asking permission. Very powerful once you get used to it."

Sam picked it up and scanned the page, he really hadn't thought about asking permission too much and reading it would give him something to do while he was waiting for others to arrive.

"Just a thought for you Sam. See that name badge there?"

Sam looked at the suggested name and read 'Alison Parker, Senior Designer, Parker and Associates'. Sam flashed a look of confusion at Bill.

In response to the look, Bill continued. "She is the daughter of a family engineering firm. Even though she has the title of Senior Designer, she has a number of jobs, as happens in family firms. I know she is looking for more work in light engineering, air conditioning and refrigeration. She is also pretty new to the whole selling idea. Could be a chance to get to know her and maybe give her a few ideas in the sales area. It is all about contacts and referrals which do make the best prospects."

Sam felt it might be the blind leading the blind, but he was also learning that connections counted. He thanked Bill for the thought.

A woman entered pushing a trolley of cups and saucers and everything needed to make coffee and tea and positioned it along the rear wall. She plugged in a kettle and a coffee maker and arranged biscuits on a plate, which reminded Sam that he hadn't had breakfast.

"Coffee will be ready soon," said Bill, as if he could read his thoughts.

Sam smiled and nodded, and said "Thanks."

"We are going to talk some more about the R's today. Different people pick up different things as they need them," said Bill, "How did you do with the relationship side of what you are doing?"

"I am trying," Sam replied. He remembered what Rebecca had said. "I did find out that our CEO knows a lot of other CEO's of companies we deal with and that his Personal Assistant knows most of the other EA's," said Sam.

"And how is that helping?" asked Bill.

"The CEO's EA, her name is Rebecca, offered to find out the details of the contracts manager on the current tender," Sam replied.

"Great!" said Bill, "And did she get that for you?" he asked.

Sam looked a little sheepish.

"I haven't followed up with her," he replied.

"Why haven't you followed up with her? It seems like a no-brainer," said Bill, a smile still on his face but the question pointed.

"I have been too busy," said Sam, though he knew it sounded lame. "I have been chasing quotes and making sure we have accurate tenders."

Bill nodded understandingly. "You know what I think the problem is?" he asked.

"Not really," Sam replied.

"It sounds to me as if you are trying to do it all alone, carrying the whole load," said Bill.

Sam breathed in sharply, he wasn't expecting such a response, and he realised that Bill was probably right.

Bill smiled reassuringly. "Imagine a full bag of cement. Imagine holding it on your own versus having even one person help, which halves the load – how does that feel? Better?" Bill asked.

Sam nodded.

"I hadn't thought of it that way before. I need to get all the help I can get," he replied.

"Even if they only take a quarter of it to hold, that's a quarter less that you have to carry. Focus on using their strengths and not simply moving stuff on. That way everyone is at their most effective," said Bill.

It was so simple and obvious that he knew Bill was right; he needed to share the load and Rebecca for one could help with that.

"In this day and age, Sam, you can go outside your business for the help if needed. Virtual Assistants can be anywhere in the world, cost very little and are pretty smart – although you do need to find the right one. I can suggest a couple of websites if you would like." With that Bill excused himself and turned to greet the next guest. His thoughts were interrupted by the next person arriving, and he went back to reading the article 'Ask for Permission.'

The room slowly filled and Sam was interrupted by numerous people who came and said hello to him, and business cards started to change hands. He was pleased that he had found enough in his jacket pocket for everyone. Hearing his name called broke his thoughts. It was Bill, and in a few seconds, he had been introduced to Alison Parker.

"Alison, Sam is in a business similar to you but makes some different componentry. He has been working in sales and has a pretty good idea what you will find as a light engineering company out there. I would suggest a coffee some time."

The framing of why Alison would find Sam a good person to talk to and how the coffee opportunity had all been set up simply and easily by Bill was not lost on Sam. Open, honest and simple. He turned to Alison and shook hands, and they fell into an easy conversation about their related businesses.

A few minutes later Bill began speaking.

"Hello everyone. There is no point introducing myself since if you are here, you already know me and I know you. I will, however, make you one promise today, and that is that I won't play my trumpet."

A ripple of laughter flowed through the room.

"This get together is to say thank you to you all. Most of you have used my services or have introduced me to people who have, and I consider this a room of friends," said Bill.

Sam had wondered about where he fitted in, he wasn't sure he would be a customer of Bill's, but he might recommend him to people in the future. In fact, the more he got to know Bill, the more likely that seemed.

"It is a given that you all have mastery. That goes without saying." Bill launched into a serious tone that caught the whole room up. "If clients would come to your door you could add such value. When they turn up at your door you can provide great results and solutions. If only they would come..."

Bills voice trailed off, and the room wondered what would come next. "The real question is, do you have the leverage to take your mastery to their world and interest them enough, talk the right language, have the right approach, and bring them into your world so they can experience your mastery? If you cannot do that, what use is your mastery?" The silence hung in the room.

Bill continued. "So we construct plans and ideas that help us make this journey possible. We build a bridge between our mastery and our prospects to cross over and bring them back. We call it a sales process. We all have a sales process, don't we?" asked Bill.

The looks on the faces of those in the room indicated that not everyone enjoyed their sales process and maybe some of them did not have such a good one.

"And sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, sometimes they work for one person or a certain personality type and not for another, isn't that true?" he paused and watched heads nodding quietly.

"Lions are lions, and ducks are ducks, and that's that. Some people can sell and some can't! Or is that really the case?"

Sam listened attentively determined to get the most he could from the session.

"There are a few fundamental things that if you pay proper attention to them, you can start to make the sales process more you, more comfortable and certainly more effective," said Bill.

"I mentioned that lions are lions and ducks are ducks before, and that may seem a strange thing to say, but it is true. I meet many that wish they could hunt more like a lion in the belief that it will make them better at sales."

"Well, maybe it would. But they are not hunters and never will be. They have the ability to paddle hard in a direction, to communicate, to ask intelligent and deep questions that lead to real solutions that serve the client as well as the organisation. This is their strength. They are ducks and should try to be the best ducks they can be."

"The Lions have that ability to boldly knock on doors and also make the deal happen. They can close. But do they sell what the company wants sold more than what the client needs? They are usually very good at persuasion and influence."

"The fact remains that we are what we are and while we can move towards the skills the other persona has, we fundamentally are what we are. We can enhance our strengths and learn how to work with our challenges. The four R's help us do this."

"We all know about reading, writing and arithmetic, but those aren't the R's I want to talk about. These four R's are just as fundamentally important though. I'd like to talk about them; is that ok with you?" Bill asked, looking around the room.

Sam didn't notice himself nodding like everyone else.

"Great!" said Bill, "This is about providing four strong, solid, pillars to build that sales process bridge on, that I call the four R's. In all seriousness, without strong pillars, a bridge looks pretty unstable and unreliable. The good news is that these pillars fit under any bridge you have. You do not have to reinvent your sales process. In fact, all sales processes do the same thing – give you a path towards sales."

"At 3 Piece Sales, we often meet companies that are going to throw out their sales process and try another one. But sadly they will have no better luck than the one they already have once the novelty of newness wears off. The problem is often that it has been created by a 'Sales Superman' and is being used by someone more akin to Clark Kent." A few laughs met this comment.

"You see, it is not really the sales process that is holding us back. They all fundamentally work. It is how we are using them that is the problem. At 'Three Piece Sales' we work to add the missing pieces of your sales jigsaw. This is the missing ten to twenty percent that will make it work for you."

"It is about aligning who you are with the sales process, so you feel more comfortable and able to use it. We add who you are to the process and customise it to you, so you can work with your strengths and be successful. So you do not feel like you have to change and become some 'sales dog' you don't want to be."

Behind Bill was a whiteboard and as he had been talking, Bill had drawn a bridge span on it. Now he added four pillars underneath the bridge. This is the bridge between your Mainland of Marketing and the Peninsula of Prospects you so would like to reach and attract. It rests on four pillars. These are our four R's."

"Knowing them will show us what stops us from being successful today; it's about aligning people with what works. It is about showing people, just like you, how to adapt the sales process to suit who they are instead of trying to adapt who they are to the sales process. Guess what – that very rarely works. Would that be worthwhile? Are you happy with that?" he asked.

Again everyone nodded.

"Two of the pillars are logical, and two are emotional. The first one we come to is an emotional one called being 'Real', and it is about being real to who you are."

As he wrote 'real' on the first pillar, Bill asked, "When I say the word 'salesman' what comes to your mind?"

The same sort of words that everyone had come up with the first time Sam saw Bill was repeated.

"Okay, okay, I think we get the idea. Here is the problem. From a young age, you start to create the code you live by, and you have strict ideas about what you do and do not want to be. But to do the job required of you, you feel that you must become someone that you have just described as being untrustworthy and a shark and all the rest. It causes a real disconnection between who you are and who you think you have to be to do your job."

"Being real gets the deal; it's as simple as that. People spot fakes. When you put on this mantle of sales, you try to become someone you do not want to become. At a basic level, the customer will pick up that something is wrong; you will betray yourself every time. You have got to be real. Take the sales jacket off otherwise things will be strained and the customer will sense the falsehood simply because you are nervous about it and they will pick it up fast. Something will simply not be right. So for yourselves and for your salespeople here's an invitation – Please be yourself!"

Bill paused, and Sam looked around at the faces of those attending, he had never seen so many people looking so studious at a seminar, the message was undoubtedly getting through. He wished his CEO could have been there.

Bill continued, "If you are a bastard, be a bastard, people buy from bastards!"

Now people looked shocked!

"It is true. Very brash and almost rude people make plenty of sales simply because they are honestly representing themselves to others. Here is the kicker - they don't buy from bastards that are pretending to be nice; it feels false and just doesn't work, does it? The falseness is far worse than the brash person being honest about who they are."

"I can see some of you thinking that if I am a bastard, some of the customers may not like me and then they won't buy from me. Let me tell you, they were the ones who would never buy anyway; they wouldn't buy because they are not connected to you."

"If you are very sensible you pass those people on to someone who they will connect to, to someone who can be real in relating to them. Think of it as a form of pre-qualification."

Bill paused for a moment before continuing.

"Let me give you a simple example of being real in a real sales environment. I have done some work with an engineering company, and they were having trouble closing. They would explain all the technical stuff and things were going well but when it came to getting the sale, it just all fell apart. If you think about it, they were giving them the 'information', but not the 'motivation' to act!"

"In reality the people selling were engineers, they admitted that they hated sales. They actually told me that they hated having to sell. It just wasn't who they were so it is quite understandable, after all, they go to university for between four and seven years and, as far as they were concerned, a salesman goes and completes a six-hour course, and that's it."

Sam thought about what Bill was saying, he could have been describing him. He didn't like the title 'salesman' because to him it really did mean pushy people selling vacuum cleaners and used cars that broke down as you drove off the sales lot.

"So when the engineers were trying to be salespeople and close the deal, they weren't being themselves and it came through. They had built a good solid understanding and relationship, but when it came time to actually do the business, the engineers felt awkward and nervous about it. This simple act had changed the way they talked and acted. They telegraphed that nervousness and the potential clients picked it up and reacted by backing off."

"You see, the client does not have to understand why they feel that things are suddenly not going well, they just have to react."

"So we suggested they try being honest and real with the customer and got them to say something like this..."

"I spend 97% of my time looking after people like you, and I love doing that. I know what you need inside out, every technical detail. When we supply you with something, it will work perfectly every time, and if for any reason it doesn't, I know how to fix so it will operate flawlessly. But 3% of my job is asking people, just like you, to buy from us. I am not good at that. I am just not a salesman. If you are happy working with me on the technical stuff, I guarantee you will be happy with the solution we come up with; but to be honest, if you expect a slick salesman's close that's not me; it won't be polished or clever. I could simply ask you about what you need and put thoughts and ideas together for your consideration. We can modify these as you direct until we create the solution you are looking for. Is that ok? Can we work together like that?"

Bill paused and you could have heard a pin drop.

"Their sales went up 28% in 3 months. You see our customers don't like being sold either. Who does? When we asked their customers as we did in a survey, they said they didn't like being sold either!"

"I would like to suggest a simple three-step plan to help you align your sales process. Would that be useful?" Upon receiving a positive response, Bill continued.

"Firstly, work through your sales process, mapping out what the critical elements are. Second, circle any area you are not really comfortable with that represents that moment you have never been able to reconcile with who you are. Then thirdly, work out how you can make the process more real to you and get past those roadblocks because you will find, every time, that is where the sales are being lost.

"Our second pillar is also an emotionally based one. You need to 'Relate' to have a relationship; you need to relate because emotions are 85% of the buying decision," said Bill, writing 'relate' on a pillar and adding '85%' on the whiteboard and drawing a circle around it.

"You will recall the example we have just talked about with the engineers, right? Maybe you can relate to how they felt.

"Have you ever presented a great proposal to a client and been sure you have done everything right. You present well and feel you have explained all the features and done a great job. So you try to get a commitment, and they say," Bill let it hang in the air for a few seconds before continuing, "I'll think about it! Ever had that happen?"

Once again the nods ran through quite a few of the attendees.

"Maybe it was because you could have been putting on a false persona of some kind or been nervous. But there is also something else that could be missing.

"Maybe they have received all the information that allows a logical evaluation, but they are missing the motivation to act. Guess what? That is an emotional response. 'Here's the thing folks; the heart buys; the head justifies! Dale Carnegie said that a long time ago and it's still true today.'"

Sam thought about the hiking boots he bought last year, he remembered thinking, 'they make me look like a real hiker' and also that the price was high, but probably worth it since they looked so good and made him feel the part.

"There is another adage we have probably all heard. We buy from those we like and trust!" said Bill pointing at them to reinforce the message.

"Let's look at something like using the services of a babysitter. If you are a babysitter, how can I trust you with my children, which is a very emotional thing, if I don't think they are going to be safe with you?" he asked.

"How can I trust you with my business if I don't trust you? Is there any difference? In this modern era, we don't always think of things like emotions as being important. So you must relate to the people you want to do business with, you must have their trust, you also need to make a connection at an emotional level."

As if was reading his mind, Bill said, "And if you are tendering for work, treat the tender as your customer. It's a bit like the nurse at the hospital referring to my mum as the hip replacement in bed five rather than 'that lovely Mrs James' in bed five. Which one feels better to you?"

Sam smiled, even though Bill had taken him through this before, he was really enjoying the different approach and presentation style. It was making him think and feel more confident by the minute that he needed to get these fundamentals right.

"Your customers have a mix of emotional and logical reasoning but the most important reaction every time, the one that is set in moments and without any logical reasoning, is how they feel about you and your offering. It is the emotional response.

"Even the most logical person is ruled by their basic 'gut' instinct. It is how we are hard-wired. This is the frame of reference, positive or negative, that the rest of your information passes through and is received and perceived."

Bill paused for a moment. "Is this useful? Shall we continue to the next pillar?" Bill asked, before continuing. Agreement was unanimous.

"So let us move on to pillar number three, which is logically based and is all about your reputation. Can you deliver the goods?" Bill filled in the word 'reputation' in on the leg of the bridge.

Bill looked around at the faces in the room as if waiting for a response, but there were none.

"If you were buying a photocopier, would you choose a Xerox or a Zoowamba?" Bill asked.

"What's a Zoowamba?" someone behind Sam asked.

"Exactly!" said Bill. "Would I be right in assuming you would all steer towards the known name with a reputation for quality?"

"We have all seen start-up companies, in fact, we have all probably been approached to buy from one, and we have all probably seen them losing business to established competitors who charge twice the price. Why is that, why are people willing to pay twice the price for things?"

Bill paused before continuing.

"It's because there are often no guarantees with a start – up. Their reliability isn't known. You don't know if they will be there to service the equipment they sell, or even if they can deliver or, worse still if they really know that what they supply, will meet your needs."

"In many situations, twice the price from someone well known is worth it, just because you know that what you get is what you need and that it will perform reliably. In other words, they are reliable!"

He looked around the room.

"Can I rely on you? Do you have the credibility chip that says, 'trust me, I will deliver?' Your reputation will precede you. What does yours say about you? Do you have the right case studies and the right testimonials? Are you reliable?"

"It comes down to your level of effort in two key areas. The first is your level of commitment. It is simple. Will you commit to doing what you need to do to be reliable?" The audience looked comfortable with this idea, so Bill continued.

"Now I know you are thinking that you will happily commit to being reliable, but when it comes to the tough situations, will you REALLY commit?"

"Will you be honest when they ask that question you dread, or will you take the easy route and smudge the truth? If you face up to it and are honest, it will label you as an honest person."

A hand went up in the audience. "Won't you lose the deal if it cannot do something that they need?"

"Let's be honest. You could. But isn't it your role to provide a real solution that will do the job well? If you sell someone something that does not work, will they thank you in the long run? Morally, should you sell something that will not do the job?"

"One reason people don't like being in sales is that they feel it is where liars and cheats live. It is about being pushy and less than honest. But it is you who decides how you will act with a customer. You decide what is OK and what is not."

"Do not be a pushover because you think influencing someone is a bad thing. Remember that we all influence someone every day for some reason. It is about doing the right thing for the customer, the organisation and yourself. If you know your solution is the best one and that the client will be better off for having it – then fight for it for all the right reasons. Crusade your cause because selling is much easier with enthusiasm and conviction."

"Are you doing your potential client a favour by backing off and letting an inferior solution through the door?" Bill let that question hang in the air for a moment.

"But if you make a promise that you cannot keep, what will happen to your reputation around being reliable?" Bill waited as the audience answered the question in their own minds. "If you are only interested in the first sale, which shows a very short-term approach, then I guess you might be a little less than honest."

"But the real value in a relationship comes over time as people come back time and again and repeat the purchase cycle with you."

"Will you do what you are afraid to do to prove your reliability and safeguard your reputation or will you stay within safe bounds? Imagine the impact on a client when you fight a good fight for them and go where others have not gone on their behalf."

"An interesting concept worth thinking about is that you do not even have to win that fight to show you are reliable and willing to go into battle for your client. They will note the integrity and effort, and it will not be forgotten."

After a pause to let these ideas sink in, Bill continued. "The second key is your level of follow through. For instance, if you say I will phone back in ten minutes, do you? If you promise to get that quote to them by 3 p.m., do you?"

"One of the most important aspects of your reliability is doing what you say you will do and following up is quite possibly the most important aspect of this. Keep your promises. We have all heard the expression, 'under promise and over deliver' haven't we?"

Bill smiled at his audience.

"I know from my experiences with each of you that you are reliable, but does your customer know that? And do they feel that way when dealing with all your people?"

"Your reputation for reliability and integrity – That's the third pillar for us to build on."

Sam felt a moment of discomfort. He certainly put plenty of proof into the tenders he prepared, but he could not honestly say he had made any commitment to going the extra mile of following up. He sent the tender in and just went onto the next one, hoping for success. Something to think about indeed!

"The final pillar is being Relevant," said Bill, once again turning to the whiteboard and adding the word 'relevant' to the diagram of the bridge.

"Let me explain it this way. Imagine yourself the CEO of a busy company. You have a lot going on and never seem to get home before dark. Your time is precious, but you grant me a half hour appointment because my company has a good reputation and you think I may have something of interest to say."

"Now imagine if I walk into your office and say, 'Tell me about your business?' how impressed do you think you would be? Seriously, wouldn't you expect a little more than that these days? Especially when it's so easy to do some fact finding with the internet; don't you expect that someone coming to sell something to you has done some research? Of course, you do. Wouldn't you say to them, 'at least just go and look at our website?'"

Sam felt a pang of worry, he certainly hadn't been doing research on his customers, he had just treated the tender as the customer; he resolved to fix that right away. He also remembered a number of calls he had made to ask questions, somewhere the answers had been in the original brief. Talk about a lack of research and preparation! He wondered what sort of impression he had made, and the tones of the people at the other end of the phone came back to haunt him. They had not been welcoming.

"The secret here is doing your research properly." Bill continued, "If I walked into your business I might say," he paused and pointed to Sam, "Sam I was thinking about your business, I can tell that you want to expand your business and I wondered if there were some challenges you had right now that might be stopping that?"

"You could be at maximum capacity, your people are stretched, and you might be finding it hard to get more out of them to build the business. When people are under pressure, you never get the best out of them so it would be no surprise to see mistakes creeping in, costing you opportunity and revenue. If there was a way to help make your people 20% more efficient and steam line your processes so they could get back on top of their day and start to win those deals again, would that help? Would that be worth 20 minutes of your time?"

"Does that work?" asked Bill, "Would you respond to that? Do you think that would be relevant?"

Sam glanced around the room and saw people nodding, and then he noticed Bill pointing at him.

"And when you talk to Sam, have the courage to have an opinion. It does not matter if you are right or wrong, but an opinion creates a conversation with real depth and meaning to it. Something with substance. Either way, you generate a deeper conversation that is valuable and builds your reputation."

"Isn't that better than, Let me show you ten things we do and please pick the one that suits you?" Bill grimaced as he said it and Sam found himself doing the same."

"You want people to think that you and what you are doing is relevant to them? Doesn't that make sense?"

Once again the audience nodded in chorus.

"It all comes down to the research and preparation you are willing to do beforehand. Knowing the industry, its challenges and what is changing, and then providing solutions that challenge and solve these issues."

"Ok, those are the two logical pillars, and that concludes our set of four."

"So today we have looked at the four fundamental pillars to build a solid sales process. We said that ducks are ducks and lions are lions. I hope we have realised that it doesn't matter, as long as the sales process fits and you are being real. Remember a bridge with strong pillars is more stable than one with even one pillar missing."

Bill became very still and held everyone's attention.

"Thank you for listening, but did you get what you hoped for out of that?"

Murmurs of 'yes' trickled across the room.

"However, we need to cement these ideas and find the one we will work on first. Please turn to someone next to you, in threes is okay as well, and share something that made real sense to you that you would like to put in place. But there is a catch here. I will be asking you to make a public commitment to that action and ask you to swap numbers. You will be checking in with each other in a week or two to see how you are doing with your commitment."

Sam felt like clapping; this was time well spent and his mind was buzzing with ideas. He knew the drive back to work was going to pass quickly and he knew exactly what he needed to do.

"Hi, I'm Jack. So what did you get out of that?" Sam turned to see a middle-aged man holding his hand out. It was a good question. There was a lot to consider, where should he start?

One thing was sure. Start he would.

Chapter 8

As Sam walked to the stairs that led to his office, he noticed the pipe that Raj had been upset about was starting to look like the drawings said it should. Still, with more people working on it than there should have been, they would no doubt lose money on the job.

His in-tray was full again, and he felt his shoulders sag when he sat down and looked at it. How could he possibly move forward with tenders worth having when he was drowning in a sea of other tenders? He stood up and took a deep breath; he would have to talk to Robert.

"He's not in," said Rebecca, barely glancing up from her computer screen.

"Do you know when he's due back?" Sam asked.

She shrugged, "He's in the city. The bank called him in."

"Thanks," he said and headed to estimating.

The door to estimating flew open and he almost walked right into Bascar.

"Bascar! Just the man I want to see," said Sam.

"I hope it's not about the estimates, they are killing me at the moment."

"Yes, it is, when will you have them for me?"

"When Rod stops giving me 'walk-in' quotes to do."

"Have you done any of mine at all?" Sam asked, desperately hoping the answer would be 'yes'.

"I have started, but have you any idea how long it takes, especially with steel prices bouncing around so much and such long lead times on some sections?"

"Do we need to be that precise? Can't you just estimate?" Sam asked, hopefully.

"You mean guess?"

"No, but surely there must be a quicker way of doing these?"

"With the variety of tenders we pitch for, each is pretty unique, so they don't have much in common with each other."

"Are you heading out? When can we talk? We need to sort this out," said Sam.

"I am going to get a coffee because I have had it with estimating. I have been at it since six this morning and just need a break. Why don't you get one too and we can talk, there's no one in the lunchroom at this time of day."

The thought of the pile of paper waiting for him told him he didn't have time for coffee, but the need to get the estimates done was even more urgent, so Sam agreed.

Just like Bascar said, the lunchroom was empty.

"I don't usually stop at break times," said Bascar, "But I do when I really need a break."

"I can identify with that!" said Sam.

He had come to think that the weight of the business was all on his shoulders but here was Bascar who was under just as much pressure as he was.

"I don't know about you, but I have just too much to do," said Bascar.

"I am exactly the same, but the harder I work the more we seem to go backwards."

"I know, have you noticed how old Robert is looking these days? Something's got to change."

Sam thought about Robert talking to the bank and that sinking feeling came back. What would cause him to be called? Could it be that bad?

If it was, how would they survive if the company folded? Jobs were not growing on trees right now and how sellable was a salesperson who is coming from a company that failed for lack of sales? Would they have to move to follow opportunity, the children uprooted from school and taken from their friends? And what about Penny? She had spent half her life here so how would she cope? He pushed the thought from his mind.

"There are just too many quotes," said Bascar, "That's the problem."

"Robert would say that's the opportunity," Sam replied.

"Well, he is welcome to jump into the chair next to mine. He won't get bored." Bascar rested his chin on his hands. "I just don't know how much more of this I can handle. Maybe I should look for something else to do."

Sam couldn't stop the grin appearing on his face, which brought a frown from Bascar who said, "I don't think it's very funny."

"It isn't. It's just that I was feeling the same way."

They both laughed at that.

"So what do we do?" asked Bascar, pleased that he had found someone to talk to.

"Get rid of half the tenders," said Sam.

"Well that's your job, you are the one who creates work for me, you know."

"Apart from the walk-in quotes," Sam reminded him.

"And we are getting a lot of those right now. I can't believe we are even bothering with such small jobs, we didn't use to look at anything under \$150,000; now we are quoting jobs worth \$3,000 which just eat up my time."

"But they can't take much time to do if they aren't worth much," said Sam.

"No, but they need to be done immediately which means I am constantly starting and stopping quotes on tenders for you, which means they take twice as long. And just because it uses less material does not mean it has fewer components."

"I have been thinking we need to concentrate on tenders where we have some special expertise or advantage," said Sam.

"I can tell you right now which tenders we won't get," said Bascar, "Anything where we have to bring in special materials we don't usually use. I will guarantee that we either have to pay premium prices for the material to get it in time to meet the tender delivery requirements, or we have to buy a minimum quantity which is more than we need, which I have to build into the price. We can never compete with people who work with it all the time and have it in their own stores."

Sam sat back in his chair. Materials were not a big part of his world, and he hadn't thought about it as being a big factor.

A thought surfaced; it was about being RELEVANT. They certainly weren't being relevant to anyone if they were tendering for jobs where they clearly couldn't compete!

And what does that do for the customer's perception of them when they keep tendering high? That destroys any prospect of them being seen as RELIABLE.

"Would it take you long to tell me which tenders have special material requirements?" Sam asked.

Surely that had to be a big negative drain on their limited time? Not only that, but the client would be expecting it to be too dear before they even opened it.

"Easy, I can do that in about five minutes."

"Can you do it right after we finish the coffee?"

"Just for you..." Bascar paused, "I will."

Sam felt an imaginary weight shift a little on his shoulders. Was it better to get the numbers up or focus more attention on the ones that they could win and that were more profitable?

The answer was obvious. It would take some bravery to go with it.

This was something tangible; now all he had to do was justify not submitting the tenders to Robert.

Chapter 9

"Half!" said Sam, incredulously.

He had expected that some of the tenders would have special materials, but not half.

He was sitting in the lunchroom with Bascar.

"And I only included the ones where it was a major part of the costs," said Bascar.

Sam swallowed, how was he going to convince Robert that they should reduce the number of tenders by half?

Bascar could see how shocked Sam was.

"But the good news is that if we just quote on the others, I can have them done a week before they are due in, except for the first couple. We are already behind on them, but I can meet the deadline for them too."

One big breath later Sam said, "Let's do it."

He didn't have much choice. He recognised one of the few options that instinctively felt like it would make a difference. Things had to change.

The only other alternative would be him getting the quotes late and then having to rush things together to get the tenders in on time.

Sam took a deep breath and ran over his argument as he walked up to Rebecca to ask if Robert was in.

"He's not seeing anyone," she said before he could open his mouth.

All he could think to say was, "Oh."

She stared at him as if expecting more. All he could think of was that this wasn't a good sign after the bank yesterday. "When will he be available?" he asked.

"Try Monday," she replied.

He returned to his desk with a little voice of concern whispering in his ear, distracting him and making it hard to get motivated.

And then another of those little ideas popped into his head. They keep coming once they started and this one had some potential. He picked up the phone. "Bascar, I know you are busy but can we catch up?" he asked.

The lunchroom was empty.

"Are you sure we can do this? Bascar asked.

"Sometimes it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission," he replied, not feeling nearly as confident as his words suggested.

They had all the tenders spread out on the table in front of them.

"We know what tenders to pay attention to that I have already sent for quoting, we just need to quickly get this lot into two piles so I can get some forward visibility on what we are putting in," said Sam.

It only took them half an hour, which was good because the lunch break buzzer went, which meant the room would soon fill with noisy people.

Sam put a sheet of paper between the two piles and dropped them back into the tray he had carried them in.

They both felt happier as they left, feeling an unusual sense of getting things under control. At least now he would have a bigger number of tenders that he could tell Robert they were putting in.

He made up a list of all the tenders and emailed the company names to Rebecca, asking what contacts she had for him at those companies. He was going to do this properly, and make sure his bridge had all the support it could get.

Several hours later, enjoying a rare feeling that things were somehow better, he stretched in his chair and tried to work some kinks out of his shoulders. For a moment he closed his eyes and tried to relax. As his mind stopped churning through everything he had to do, he realised that he hadn't had lunch or even morning tea. He sat up straight in his chair and opened his eyes, ready to walk down to the shop on the corner of the block that doubled as a food takeaway.

"Sleeping?" asked a voice behind him.

A chill gripped his stomach, it was Robert.

"No," he replied hurriedly, "Just thinking."

"I just spoke to Rebecca. She told me you wanted contacts for a list of companies we are tendering to. I was just wondering what you were planning since I deal with these companies at a high level."

"Rebecca knows key people in those companies. I only deal with the people handling the administration of the tenders, and I thought it might be useful to get to know more people."

Robert sighed and shook his head.

"We have trouble getting tenders in on time, and you want to spend your time getting to know more people? I have to wonder where your priorities are here."

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. Was this really the right time to talk about Relationships and the R's that he had learnt from Bill? He decided not to and changed the subject.

"We have a good forward list of prospective tenders," he said, handing the list he had just finished to Robert.

Robert scanned the list and frowned.

"I don't see the Dockrell tender."

Sam knew exactly where the Dockrell tender was, it was in the pile they were not going to reply to.

He took a deep breath and decided to tell Robert.

"We have been trying to segment tenders in terms of their fit with what we do well and the ones that are most profitable. Dockrell is a big tender, but we have to subcontract a lot of plate rolling and painting out, and that leaves almost no profit, especially if we were to go in at a price where we have any chance of getting the work."

"So you aren't even trying?" said Robert incredulously.

"Don't you realise that the bank just looks at cash flow and that gives them confidence. Lower cash flow equals lower confidence, and that means no extension of overdraft and no business!"

"But if we keep tendering the way we are, we may pick up some jobs, but we aren't getting the ones that really suit our capability."

"So what you are saying is that we need to be better at tendering?" said Robert.

"Yes!"

"Sam, as you know, I encourage innovative thinking but there is a time and a place for everything, and the bank breathing down our necks is not the right time to change! Tendering is a numbers game, you know how I feel about that," said Robert, repeating what Sam had heard dozens of times before.

"Yes, it is, but it's about getting the RIGHT numbers. Looking at the ones that work for us, not projects that we have to kill ourselves to do and then make very little money."

He knew he was talking Robert at a head to head level, but he really did not feel that he had a choice.

"We have been doing things this way for the past twenty years, and it has worked for us," said Robert.

"Maybe it did when we had five people working on getting tenders in, but now we don't, so we need a targeted approach," defended Sam

Robert nodded slowly, and Sam felt a tiny bit of relief, he seemed to be getting the message.

"Things have changed," Sam continued, "Today it's about Relationships and being Reliable and Relevant to our customers."

"The only 'R' I am interested in, is Results," said Robert.

"And that's what you get when you have a good Relationship, and you are Relevant and Real to your customers. When we put in tenders we clearly are not suited for, we break most of those, and that means we don't look good when something we are suited for comes along."

Robert nodded again, but his eyes were glazing over as he interjected, "Look this all sounds great, but we only have so many hours available, and we need to survive!"

"Which is why I split the tenders between those that we might really want and those we don't," Sam retorted.

Robert fell silent for a moment, "So why don't we just put in high tenders from the ones we don't want," he said, "We might still pick up a couple."

"But it takes time away from making sure we do a great job on the ones we want, and it positions us as a high-cost option in the minds of the people reviewing the tenders, which might stick in the future when they look at tenders we really want to get. It also wastes their time, which isn't very respectful." Sam explained.

Robert looked less than convinced.

"I don't know if we have time for all this relationship stuff," Robert said, nodding at the list of tenders Sam had given him. "We really need results!"

"And that's what I am aiming at," said Sam, swallowing hard as he realised this really was his neck he was sticking out.

Sam took a deep breath and ventured "Robert, I cannot get all the tenders in AND do a good job on all of them. I have to pick the smart ones and give them my best shot. I am sure that is how we can get the numbers up."

More silence.

Finally, Robert replied. "Let's hope you are right. It's not just your job that you are playing with. Understood?"

Robert left as Sam sank deeper into his chair, any thought of lunch evaporating. This was it; he had to make this work. He felt overwhelmed. Could he actually manage to do this? He would just have to work longer hours. He would talk to Penny, she would understand; she would have to understand.

The phone rang. He usually answered instantly, but he just stared at it for a long moment, before finally answering.

It was the contracts administrator for one of the tenders he was working on.

"We have a new issue with the drawings, there have been some changes. I will mail out the drawings, but it will be a couple of days before you get them. Just letting you know in case you want a copy sooner and can pick them up."

"I'll pick them up," Sam answered without hesitating.

"Great, I'll email you the address where you can collect them," said his caller.

"Excuse me," said Sam with a sudden thought, "could I arrange for a courier to pick them up in an hour?"

"No problem. I will email you the address. Tell them to ask for Sandra Jennings." He hung up.

He made a mental note to ring them back and confirm arrival as a contact point.

Sam was quietly congratulating himself on being time smart when a ping indicated he had email; it was a list of contacts from Rebecca. He was impressed with how quickly she had responded.

It was a good looking list with little notes attached that told him special information such as the General Manager of Procurement was the son in law of the Board Chairman or that the EA to the CEO was the Captain of their local netball team. He smiled at some of the notes; though he wasn't sure how useful some of them would be.

He would have to buy Rebecca some chocolates to say thank you. The information had him feeling much more positive. He scanned down the list looking for a contact at the company that had just called him. She had listed two; Martin King, who was EA to the General Manager and Estelle Rohan, who she listed as strategy coordinator. He wasn't sure what that was but made a note anyway before he picked up the phone to call them.

He got through to Martin on the first try, very different from when he had previously tried to get hold of general managers.

Some of Bill's advice had surfaced in his mind, so he was prepared when the phone was answered.

"Hello Martin, Rebecca suggested I should call, and I promised her I would. She suggested a meeting would be beneficial to both of us as we work through the jobs we are looking to do together. I will be in town tomorrow and was wondering if you have a few minutes so I can introduce myself. I promise to keep it brief, but I have a couple of ideas that could be useful."

They agreed upon a time and Sam was left wondering why he hadn't done this before. He was smart enough to know it would not work all the time but he also knew it would never work if he did not ask.

He then dialled Estelle, and after getting the introductions out of the way and her asking how Rebecca was, he got to the point of his call.

"I am going to be in your building tomorrow with Martin and Rebecca recommended you as the right point of contact to make sure our strengths match your goals and requirements. I want to make sure I am not going to chew up your time on a proposal that is not going to match up."

She said that made sense and readily agreed, suggesting they could go for coffee in the staff canteen. He had been relevant to her, and it had shown.

When the call finished, he sat back smiling, he was killing three birds with one stone. It was possible this stuff really worked.

Now all he had to do was talk to Penny.

Chapter 10

Sam almost walked right into Art as he came through the door; he was preoccupied and not really paying attention. He had been too busy to think about Art or the accident much, and it surprised him to see that he was back at work.

"Hey Sam, thanks for taking me to the hospital, I really appreciate it."

Sam snapped back to the present, "Glad to see you back," he replied. He liked Art, even if he hadn't had much time to think about him after the accident.

"It has really made me think about what's really important in life, you know, my family, stuff like that. The doctors say I am going to be fine, light duties right now, but back to normal in six weeks or so," Art said, holding up his hand, which was still bandaged.

The mention of family and what was important stuck with Sam; he had spoken to Penny last night, and it hadn't gone well.

He knew he had approached it poorly. He had started off with talking about finances and how they needed to talk before making commitments like the braces Jess had gotten only the day before. She had asked him how he could deny their daughter such things, and he had tried to say he wasn't, but by then it was too late.

He should have said that he was worried about work and whether he would have a job in the near future.

But what Art had said kept coming back to him. Sam grabbed the brochures he had come into work for and decided he needed to talk to Penny. He would drop in and have lunch with her on his way back from the city.

Martin had surprised him. He was used to EAs being tough-minded, super organised women and not at all like Martin. He was older than Sam had expected and wore a suit.

Sam started by explaining that he appreciated that part of Martin's role was to shield his CEO from time-wasting nonsense and that the insights from this meeting would make the time spent going through the RFP relevant and worthwhile. Martin agreed whole-heartedly.

Before he left, Martin had introduced him to the CEO who just happened to arrive as he was leaving. He was introduced as being from Robert's company, and the CEO asked how 'the old slicer' was going, the usual resistance evaporating. He had asked that Sam pass on his best wishes and to remind Robert that he was still waiting for a rematch.

Sam left with a rare smile and feeling very confident. There was something to this relationship idea and how much they mattered. It also felt good to actually connect with the people Sam usually only emailed.

He arrived almost exactly on time to meet Estelle, the strategy coordinator. He was ushered into her office just as she was finishing a phone call and waved her hand for him to take a seat.

"So what are you trying to sell me?" she asked bluntly after they made their way down to the empty staff canteen.

"Nothing, at least not today." he replied honestly, "It made sense to explore the synergies between our companies. Also, Rebecca said it would be good for me to meet you and that was good enough for me." That brought a smile to Estelle's face. "In this way, we are on the same page and can get to the relevant points if we do look at future options."

The smile remained, and she seemed to relax, satisfied with the answer.

"You won't believe how many people pester me with things they want to sell! It gets very tiring."

"I won't promise that will never happen with me, but I can try and make sure it is relevant to you and the organisation," Sam replied. He was gratified to see the slight smile stay on Estelle's face.

Relaxing back into her seat, Estelle told him that her role was to link projects and departments together throughout the organisation to ensure that no opportunities dropped between the cracks.

"A bit like managing the white space on an organisation chart," she explained with a smile.

The analogy made no sense to Sam, but he remembered a comment about personalising the conversation and decided it was time to be a little bit braver than usual. "It sounds like a role you enjoy and one you seem to take a great deal of pride in?"

"People say I can be a bit too organised sometimes, but I think things need to run like clockwork, or we just waste time." Estelle recounted several examples where so much time and effort could have been saved if a little more thought and organisation had gone into a project before a 'go button' was pushed.

"So is your company one of those that claim they can do anything if there are dollars in it?" she asked.

Sam found her directness as refreshing as it was unusual. He laughed.

"We used to," he replied.

"I like honesty," she said.

"Agreed," he replied, "For us it's about being real, not pretending to be what we aren't."

She asked what they did well and Sam gave an honest overview, including some areas they had real strengths in. She seemed impressed, and he could almost see her ticking off boxes in her head. They talked for longer than he had expected. Sam made an effort to stay both relevant and real, though he caught himself a couple of times slipping back into his old habits. He noticed her look at her watch.

"Our time is up. It has been worthwhile meeting you Sam. It's refreshing to meet someone who talks about things directly relating to the tender and not wasting my time. You have no idea how many hours I spend reading through tenders that would never work. Sometimes it's like the person writing them had not even read the RFP document!"

"I would like to avoid falling into that trap and costing you time and effort if I could." said Sam, "Would it be okay to touch base for clarification occasionally if needed, to avoid wasting your time and effort?"

"I guess so; as long as I am not disadvantaging anyone else too much. I am happy to stay in touch for such things," Estelle said as she stood up and shook his hand. "Likewise," he replied, meaning it.

A last thought occurred to Sam. "Estelle, Rebecca has been great. If I was to get her a small thank you, what would you suggest?" Surely being relevant made sense here to didn't it?

On the drive back to the office Sam couldn't stop smiling, he felt better than he had in a long time. This sort of approach took effort, but it wasn't like the energy required to race against the clock to do a bad job just to get a tender in. It was an investment which Sam didn't mind making because he knew it would pay off.

He went through a checklist in his head. He had been real about himself and how the company had approached tenders in the past. He kept the conversation relevant to Estelle and felt he had added to the company's overall reputation for reliability at the same time.

The R's could be integrated into his everyday activity.

When Sam arrived back at his office, he hardly noticed the stairs, which were usually a solid climb. He turned on his computer and noticed the orange light on his phone that said he had messages. The first was from Penny asking him to get some milk on the way home. The second was from Art, which surprised him since he had never left a message before.

'Hey Sam, this is Art. I just wanted to let you know that I was talking to a friend who is an engineer at Reibelt Industrial about the fiasco with the pipe. He said they were having the same problem with a pipe which was just delivered to the site, but they don't have the equipment to fix the problem. A possible job here, it all helps to pay the bills; I'll email his details to you.'

Art was right, every bit helped – as long as it was the right work with the right margins. Sam opened the email from him and immediately called the number. Ten minutes later he was back in the car heading to a meeting with Joel, the site engineer. The site was close so Sam could afford the time. He hadn't had much to do with Reibelt, though he knew they sometimes tendered on similar work. Sam wondered why they didn't have the equipment to fix the pipe.

Sam was five minutes into the trip when he realised that he should have spoken to Rebecca, to see what she knew about them. Here he was, going to meet a company and he hadn't even taken the time to look at their website! How on earth was he going to be relevant if he didn't know the basics? He called Rebecca, who answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Rebecca, sorry to trouble you, but I was just wondering what you know about Reibelt Industrial?"

Her instant answer told him he really had messed up by not taking a few minute to talk to her first.

"Kevin Reibelt is Robert's wife's cousin. There isn't too much contact between them, though he is on Robert's Christmas card list. I guess the fact that they are in the bottom of the South Island probably accounts for that."

"Thanks for the introduction to Martin and Estelle. The meetings went well from my point of view, and they are great contacts. You really helped. Thank you."

Rebecca's tone softened. "Yes. Estelle sent a one-liner email saying you talked sense. You seem to have a pass mark with her, which is rare enough, so job well done. I am happy to keep firing the information if you keep making a good impression for the company."

"Count on it and thanks again."

He made another call to Art and gained more useful insights about recent jobs and other areas that his friend had recently been unhappy with. There seemed to have been a pattern of being let down by the manufacturers and suppliers they had subcontracted to in recent months. He would have to make sure he worked with this when he talked to them today.

It struck Sam that he was probably more realistically prepared with those two calls than a lot of other times he could recall. He couldn't help but wonder how some of those calls might have gone if he had taken the extra time to find more information than you see on the website. And it only took minutes to do.

On the return journey, he reflected that the meeting had gone well. Sam opened by reconfirming that Art was the common connection for the meeting and had mentioned that the two companies were connected through family which immediately established some trust.

He then laid the idea on the table that Art had talked about the troubles with the pipe and that he was there to help him and the company if possible, as Sam's company had the equipment and expertise to possibly add some value.

Joel explained that the pipe had been imported, and they intended to splice into it on site, but that was almost impossible given the many flat spots and the distortion on what was supposed to be a circle. Reibelt had been pushed by the customer to buy the pipe from a cheap supplier, so they had delivered it straight to site, rather than via their workshops where they might have some chance to force it to fit.

"I am getting it in the ear from management as it is holding up the works and costing us. If you can get started on it quickly, I don't see why it shouldn't be you that does the job."

"I appreciate that you realise we will not be the cheapest you could find but we will always be competitive and I think we can accommodate your timing and deliver a circular pipe back made to the right dimensions. That will stop more costly hold up's on the job or unwanted attention from management.

"We will have to get it delivered to our plant so we can fix it," said Sam, already imagining the reaction from the poor crew who had to do the job.

"That I can do," Joel replied. "Oh, I don't suppose you know anyone who could paint it before it comes back; it was supposed to be epoxy primed and painted, but somehow it arrived with just a scratch coat of primer on it!"

"I do actually; I will get them to contact you."

"Great. We can't afford any more delays in the project," said Joel.

Sam concluded by saying, "Joel, we have both been let down by people making promises they could not keep. We need to keep our reputations clean. I will do my best to work this through as quickly as possible. If there are any complications at our end, I will contact you right away so you can work with us, but I think we can handle this for you. Fair enough?"

Joel gave him a smile and a look of relief. "Actually, that sounds great. Extra time if something does not go according to plan and an honest call would make a refreshing change. Thanks."

Sam said his goodbyes and headed straight to their painting contractor. He hadn't visited them before though he knew who they were. On the way, he called Art at the factory and warned them that the rush job was coming. They were less than happy, but he explained it was fast money and they appreciated the need for that right now.

The painting contractors said that business was quiet and they were grateful for the referral to Joel. They complained that they were finding customers requesting complete jobs quoted and so when they found work, it was often not possible to be a realistic option for the client. A light bulb went off in Sam's head and he arranged to catch up with them another day to talk about the work they were finding and possible ways of working together.

He left with "One good turn deserves another. If you can find jobs and bring them to us, we are happy to work with someone that can tie up the ends and make it happen as well," still ringing in his ears. He was starting to connect the dots, and it felt at a basic level like it was going to work.

"For you," said Sam, placing the peanut slab chocolate on Rebecca's desk. Estelle had said these were a particular weakness for Rebecca, "you saved my life with the info on Reibelt, thank you."

"Anytime," she replied, before going back to what she was doing.

He went back to his office via Art, who had already started to schedule the time they needed and wanted to know when he could expect delivery. Sam gave him all the details he had including the need to send it to the painter as soon as it was finished.

He spent the rest of the day putting a decent amount of time into the fewer amount of tenders. If Robert didn't like it he would get fired, but if he didn't take the chance, they might all be out of a job anyway.

He found some things he couldn't quite interpret and phoned the company involved. This time he made sure they hadn't sent out any revisions or already answered questions.

He made the point when talking to them to tell them that he only wanted to make sure that he was giving attention to all of the parts of the project that were important to them because he knew how wearing it must be to get non-conforming tenders that you have to read anyway.

He was sure that by the time he hung up he had all the information he needed and they knew he was taking the tender seriously. He added the tender manager's name to his client management list and the fact he was off to his holiday home for the weekend.

He was pleased when he finished the last tender for the day. It felt like he had only done half a day's work, even though he hadn't stopped since he left home. Now all he had to do was remember to get the milk and today would be a good day.

Chapter 11

It had been two months since he cut back on the number of tenders they submitted, he had visited every company involved, making sure that he was introduced by Rebecca, wherever she had contacts. In fact, knowing Rebecca had become one of the criteria he preferred to look. He had applied the R's and done the groundwork and, by and large, felt that he had progressed further in this short time than the whole year before.

But now he was feeling nervous, they had been successful with more tenders but it was still too few, and today he would hear about two more. He had followed up with all of the companies, asking for feedback on their tender and universally the feedback had been positive, except that other companies were still beating them on price! When price had not been the deciding factor, they were doing well but impacted when it was.

How were they doing that? He decided that he would have to go and see purchasing and see what they could do to drive down costs of raw materials and he might talk to Art to see what could be done to reduce labour hours. They had to be competitive as well as having a good relationship.

A light bulb turned on in his brain. Maybe that was it! They had been playing the numbers game and presenting lots of tenders regardless of how well they fit with what they did well! The costing model didn't differentiate between what they were really good at doing and other work. Maybe they needed to tilt the model towards the work they wanted; after all, that work shouldn't have to carry the additional costs from doing the work that caused them headaches and that they often lost money on.

Art climbed the stairs to Sam's office to tell him that the latest pipe job from Joel had been finished and was being loaded to go to the painters.

"Great!" said Sam. Joel had been delighted with the pipe job and opened the door to several more opportunities in that area. Including another rush job for them.

"And you know, after we had to fix our own pipe distortion mess, these jobs are much easier to do; I guess we have the technique down pat now, but I'm not sure we want too many of those," said Art.

"Right now it's work," said Sam, "By the way, we are still missing out on jobs that we are really good at and should be getting, and it always seems to be the price; is there anything we can do to reduce costs?"

Art laughed and shook his head.

"It all depends on the job. If we have to bring in materials we don't usually stock, we often pay top prices for it and have delays in receiving shipments. And if it requires a great deal of repetitive welding, we don't have a robot to set up and leave to do it. Fix those, and we reduce the costs."

"And get the tenders," Sam added.

Art nodded and gave thumbs up sign as he left the office, to him it was simple.

Sam thought for a moment and then wrote himself a note:

What tenders do we want to get?

Why do we want them?

How do we get them?

He stared at the words; they were so basic he almost felt foolish for writing them down, but he knew they were the key. His thoughts were interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Good morning, Sam speaking," he answered.

The cheerfulness in his greeting ebbed away; it was one of the companies they were waiting to hear about a tender, and they had phoned to tell him that they had not been successful; again it seemed to be the price, although they did say that it had been close.

He sat back in his chair, threw his head back and closed his eyes; this was not good! He could imagine Robert's reaction.

He picked up the phone and called Bill James, this was just not working.

"Hello Sam," Bill said before Sam could say anything which made Sam smile, obviously he had caller ID.

"Are you busy?" Sam asked, "Do you have time to talk?"

"I have 30 seconds, so fire away," Bill replied.

Sam explained that he had been following the R's, but they just didn't seem to be working, they were still losing tenders.

"Did you get any of the tenders?" Bill asked.

"Yes, some," Sam replied.

"More than before? As a percentage of those you put in?" asked Bill.

Sam thought for a moment, despite not winning enough tenders, they were getting more as a percentage of what they put in.

"More, but not enough," he replied.

"So it's working, but something isn't quite right?" said Bill.

"They say it's the price," said Sam.

"Something I can't control," said Bill, "Time for a reality check Sam. Relationships work, and you will win tenders because the people making the choice received quiet clues and because the price had been similar. But they trust you and your company. Is that true do you think?"

Sam reflected on this before confirming that it was true. He could think of several times this had happened.

Bill continued. "But there was also a limit to the power of relationships if the price was too far away. But if others can make money at a price, can't you work out what the differences are between their offer and yours?"

"I started thinking about things and wrote down three questions for myself," said Sam, "What tenders do we want to get? Why do we want them? And how do we get them?"

"That sounds like an engineer," Bill said with a smile in his voice, "and it sounds like the right sort of questions. I think you know how to get the clients on board, providing you get the rest right. After all, it's working for you already, percentage-wise. What you need now is courage in your convictions and keep it going; these things don't just happen overnight."

"If I could leave you with a thought, Sam, it would be that if you keep asking the quality questions, and you will find the niche where your organisation can deliver the right outcome at the right price. Share the questions with those in the company that might have the answers. Usually, they just haven't thought of it like that, or they know the answers, and you simply haven't asked them."

Sam thanked Bill, and they agreed to catch up for a coffee next time he was in the city.

Sam stared again at the questions he had written and said them out loud. "What tenders do we want to get? Why do we want them? And how do we get them?"

"We want tenders we can make money on, we want them because they fit well with our core competencies, meaning we can be efficient and cost-effective. To get them, the price has to reflect our efficiency, and we need to follow the R's."

He was surprised how saying this out loud really helped clarify things. He would have to sit down and talk to Robert about this, but right now he needed to call Joel and then he would talk to Art and Purchasing.

Joel had provided them with a second job and was overjoyed to hear they were ahead of the revised schedule and that would let him claw back some of the delays they had already had.

"While I have you on the phone," said Joel, "Some parts the customer was sourcing themselves, and some of them seem to have not been ordered by them. If I shoot you across the drawings can you get me a price right away, like today?"

"I can do that," said Sam, wondering how the people in estimating would react when he walked in and upset their routine.

"I have just sent the drawing to you; can you get back to me by 4 p.m.?"

"Joel, I think so, but I will have to talk to estimating. I will say 'yes' to 4 p.m. and call if there is a problem," said Sam, though the churning of his stomach said it was going to take some doing.

"As agreed," said Joel. Sam noted that he had remembered the previous conversation and it reminded him that he had to make good on his promises. Reputations are won and also easily lost. When you make a promise, you set an expectation in the client's mind that has to be met. Internal clients are no different.

Sam looked over the drawings, this wasn't a small job; he guessed there was enough work here to keep their fabrication division busy for a couple of weeks. He printed off the drawings and walked down to estimating. He hoped the Estimating Manager, Rod Hyndman was there, he needed this done immediately.

"Take a number," said one of the engineers as he waited for Rod to get off the phone, "It's been like this all day." Finally, Rod hung up shaking his head. Then he noticed Sam standing there, obviously waiting to see him.

"It will have to be later, Sam," he said before Sam could say anything.

"I have to have his done before 4 p.m." Sam replied, before adding, "or we don't get the job."

Rod winced and sighed.

"Our hot water cistern burst at home, I have water all throughout the house, and my wife is hysterical. The plumber is there, but she doesn't understand what he is talking about, so I need to go and sort it out!"

"I have to have his done before 4 p.m.," Sam repeated. He felt sorry for Rod, but he had to have this done.

"I have half my people away with this cold that's going around, and Bascar is beginning to sniffle over there. I would do it myself, but I can't perform miracles!" he said emphatically.

Sam had an inspiration. "Rod, would it help if I went to your house and sorted out the plumber?"

Rod thought about it for a moment and replied, "It's actually a good idea Sam, and I appreciate that you are willing to make things work. But my wife may not be happy that it's not me. She may think I don't care enough or something and frankly, it is not worth my life. Sorry, but good thought."

"At least have a look and tell me if you can do it when you get back," Sam said, not taking off any of the pressure.

Rod grabbed the drawing from Sam's hand and scanned through them muttering under his breath.

"This is a big job," he said, "Even if I could start now, it would still be a push to get it done by 4 p.m."

"Then how do we get this done?" Sam asked.

Rod glanced at Bascar and frowned.

"He probably shouldn't be here," he said, nodding at Bascar, "But if you can get the take-offs done, he can probably get the pricing for you, and I will check it all when I get back." A 'take-off' was merely a summary of different components that make up the job. There could be 20 bolts in one area and thirty in another, so the take-off number is fifty in total.

With that, Rod pushed his chair back, picked up his car keys and left to sort out the problems at home.

Sam picked up the drawings and tried to digest what had been said; 'if you can get the take-offs done' those were the keywords. It was probably a bit more than he could do in the time available; this wasn't going well.

He walked over to Bascar and Rod was right, he wasn't well.

"I was just thinking of going home," he said, as he handed him the drawings.

Sam told him the whole story and how he would get him the take-offs if he could just do the pricing.

"Ok," said Bascar, reaching for another tissue to blow his nose, "But I should be home, not infecting everyone here!"

The truck with the pipe for Joel was just pulling out through the large roller door they had at the end of the building, and Raj and Art were watching to make sure it cleared the sides, before waving it on its way.

"Another job finished," Art said proudly as Sam walked by.

"Joel was very pleased, and he's asked us to give him a price on some more work, and it's the kind of work we want, but I have to get it priced today!" said Sam.

"So you've just come from putting a bomb under Rod and his people to get it done?" said Art.

"Except they are mostly all away sick and I have to get the take-offs done," said Sam.

"So, it's your lucky day, I can help with that, used to do a lot of take-off work back in the days before estimating departments," said Art, offering his help.

"And I can help," said Sam felling like a load had been lifted from his shoulders; finally some luck had come his way, and they just might be able to manage this after all.

Working together, they had the take-offs done by just after lunch, which they both skipped to get them finished.

Rob was surprised when he returned; he hadn't expected him to be able to do it so quickly.

"I will have to watch out if you can work that fast, you'll be wanting my job next," he said jokingly. "Come back at 3.30 p.m., and I'll have something for you."

At 3.45 p.m. Sam pressed the send button on the quote. He waited ten minutes then called Joel to make sure he got it.

"I have had an initial scan, and it looks good," said Joel, "Now how quickly can you make it?"

Sam almost fell off his chair. He hadn't been expecting an immediate response.

"I will have to check to make sure we have material in stock, but if we have, around two weeks would be my initial estimate," he said.

"Confirm that by email, and I'll send you the go ahead," said Joel.

"Do you need any other input from us or is that a final decision?" asked Sam.

"Look, Sam, you have come through each time, and our backs are against the wall again. I have a pretty good idea that you are in the ballpark with price. I am happy to give you the go ahead if you confirm the timing."

Sam sat stunned for a moment that this job had just seemed to fall into place. Then he realised it had happened because of the previous effort and because Joel trusted them to do it. Those R's kept coming back into the picture.

Like everything it takes a bit of time, and you simply have to be persistent. You cannot give up.

Sam went home early, not early by anyone else's standards, but early for him. A surprised Penny was about to serve dinner. She quickly laid a place for him, and he finally relaxed and talked to her and children about their day. Jess had a new friend at school and Paul would need a new road bike since he had just joined the school cycle club and wanted to join the competitive team.

Sam swallowed hard, here was more expense, and things were still touch and go at work, but he smiled, not letting Paul or Penny know how he was feeling. Oh well, the feeling had been good while it lasted. The worry returned anew.

Chapter 12

Robert was waiting in Sam's office when he arrived back from one of the rare occasions he left work to have lunch.

"Are you single-handedly trying to drive us out of business?" Robert asked.

The veins in his neck were not quite bulging, but Sam knew it wouldn't take much to push him over the edge.

"Rod Hyndman just told me that you have changed our charge-out rates! So I checked the latest tenders you did myself. On average they are 4% lower than we used to bid! What are you doing? You can't just buy jobs! You go out of business that way. I hope you have a good explanation or I will have no choice." he said, not finishing his sentence.

Sam sat down at his desk, the one that might not be his any longer if he didn't say the right thing in the next couple of minutes.

Things had been getting better, in the last few weeks he had picked up several jobs which he had only had to price, not tender on. Some of them weren't huge, but they were all jobs that fitted with their core competencies, and he knew they made money on every one of them.

They had completed the unexpected job from Joel that they had to rush the quote on. Some of the people he had been getting to know and who he had taken the time to understand were sending him packages of work that came up unexpectedly, or that didn't warrant going to tender on.

He had told them exactly what it was that they did well and they seemed to have the confidence that his company was the best bet for that kind of work. It was all about his reputation and relationship with them, relevance and reliability.

He took a deep breath and jumped in. "I am glad you brought up the issue of pricing. I wanted to talk to you before making the change, but you were away at that conference and then had a holiday, and I felt that it couldn't wait," said Sam, looking carefully for any reaction from Robert before he continued.

He explained that they had been missing jobs because of the average pricing strategy that allowed for the work that was not as profitable. That at the reduced tender rate they were making money because the type of work they were doing was precisely what they did well. That it gave them fewer headaches and surprises and therefore was profitable. That meant they did not have to subsidise other jobs that did surprise them with unexpected complications.

"So you are saying we used to lose money on some jobs and make up for it on others? Frankly, this sounds to me like normal business. You can't make money on every single job!" said Robert.

"But now we are," said Sam.

"But it's not enough, and with all the pressure we are under, now just isn't the time to experiment!"

"You're right, now is not the best time to experiment, but the old model wasn't working, and the new one is; even if we don't have enough work just yet."

Sam surprised himself by being so assertive. As far as he could see he had no choice; if Robert didn't like it and sacked him, he wouldn't be any worse off than if the company folded and he was out of a job.

Robert shook his head, "We have operated fine for the last forty years and times haven't always been good Sam, but we have always come through; we might miss some big opportunities being so selective, and at the end of the day the only thing our customers are interested in is the price!"

"Robert, with this new schedule we are giving them price, and we are making more profit by doing the right jobs."

Sam took a deep breath, he had come this far, he couldn't back down now.

"Price is a factor, but they also want delivery and quality, and they want to know we will be there to help if there are any problems and that we are experts in what we do for them."

"Sam, I don't want to have to say this, but we are almost on our knees, don't you understand that? If I don't show the bank that we have some big contracts in the pipeline, we are gone. Not in months, but in weeks, so there is no point in me firing you now because it's too late. Even some contracts that you say we lose money on would show cash flow and keep the bank happy. Get me some contracts!"

When Robert left the room, Sam sat staring at his computer screen.

Maybe he should just go now; there was no way he could just perform magic and conjure up some contracts.

He stood up and walked to the window in his office that looked out over the workshop below. He could see people working, fewer people than they used to have, but at least they were still working. This office used to belong to Robert's father, the company founder, back in the days when the boss needed a window to watch to make sure the workers were working hard.

He thought of Paul and the bike they needed to buy for him, probably carbon fibre and a long way from the one his father had bought him at that age that cost \$25, second hand, from a neighbour.

Things had changed a lot; no one watched people to make sure they worked hard anymore and second-hand bikes didn't cut it when the technology had moved so far that the latest was the minimum if you wanted to be competitive.

The window was redundant now, just like his old bike and the thinking that the company had used to get contracts in the past. That was the reality; the world moved on, which was what he was trying to do in getting tenders on work they were really good at and that they made money on. Bill's R's were the carbon fibre of how you did business today.

He sat back down and pulled up a list of all the tenders he had submitted that hadn't been awarded yet. It was longer than he thought. He totalled the value of all the tenders and then applied the percentage they had been winning to the number and sat back in his chair; the number wasn't good.

He looked again at the list, some of the tenders were much bigger than others; if they picked up those higher priced tenders, then things would look much better. He made a short list of the higher value tenders and printed out the list. Robert was right, they needed contracts, and they needed them quickly.

His thoughts were interrupted by the phone; it was Penny. He hesitated; did he really have time to talk to her right now?

He picked up the phone and answered, swallowing hard as he heard her telling him she was at the bike shop with Tony and Amber; she had been having a coffee at Amber's place when Tony, who was taking a few days of holiday, offered to check out bikes for Paul and to give her a crash course in what to look for. Now they were at the bike shop, and she was just calling to let him know they had one bike left in Paul's size; should she buy it?

"No," he said, trying to keep the panic he was feeling out of his voice, before adding, "I would like to have a look at it first."

"Oh," she replied, sounding disappointed. "I just thought that since Tony races bikes himself, he would know..." her voice trailed off.

She was right; he would know and certainly know more than he did himself. He should be happy for the help, but he didn't know how to tell her that they couldn't afford it right now, not with the company possibly closing in weeks! If he had to move to find work they would all have to move and who would know if Paul's new school would even have a cycling programme?

It struck him hard. Like a fist. And he felt a bit ashamed. He had been focussing on being real and relating with his work life, but had he been doing the same with his home life?

He had found ways to solve problems and have conversations at work, but where was the same diligence of effort with his own family. His heart sank.

"Are you there?" asked Penny

Enough was enough.

"Penny, this is hard to say, but we need to talk about some stuff happening at work. It could make a big difference, and it is important. Would it be okay if we talked that through before buying the bike?"

His tone struck straight away. Penny had always been good at picking up such things. "What is it? What's going on?"

"Can we talk when I get home? Perhaps you could ask the shop to hold the bike for a couple of days?"

"Oh, okay. I'll do that. Are you alright?"

"I will be once we talk. Okay?" asked Sam.

She didn't sound pleased as she said her goodbye's but he felt the concern in her voice as well. He held his head in his hands; he had to tell her. He felt ashamed he had put this off as long as he had.

He took a big breath and pushed the thought of Penny and Paul and the bike from his head and picked up the list of the tenders they really needed to win; he was going to need help with this!

Chapter 13

It was 7 a.m., and Sam was already at his desk, thinking about how talking to Penny had gone. It had started off badly. Penny was obviously annoyed at him, but once Sam managed to talk about work everything seemed instantly better.

The feeling of relief at Penny's understanding and support from home was almost overwhelming. It had been an enormous load off Sam's back, and he had kicked himself for not being better at handling things.

Why is it that we underestimate those that have never let us down? Those that are closest to us and would support us through everything and yet we do not have the conversations that we should?

The phone broke Sam away from the night before.

"Hello Sam, its Bill James. I know you start early, so I thought I'd catch you before you got too busy for the day. I just wanted to let you know I will be passing through your town tomorrow, and I have time for a coffee if you have."

"That will be great," said Sam, "What time do you expect to be here?"

"Around 9:30, is that ok with you?"

"Great, I'll see if our CEO is here; I'm sure he would love to meet you. I'll see you then."

"Sam, if your boss will be there and I can help I am happy to do so. But I will need more insight to make sure I do some good and not mess anything up. If you would give some thought about what I need to know, I'll call you back before we meet him. Okay?"

Sam said he would, and started thinking, the germ of an idea forming around how useful this might be in bringing Robert on board. It would be much easier with his support.

In fact, it would be impossible without it.

It was too early to check the mail to see if there were any tender acceptances there. With the time he had been putting into making sure that they were relevant to their potential customers and into being real when building relationships, he usually heard by phone or an email before the mail anyway.

That was one interesting thing he had found; he now had a lot more communication coming his way from the people who looked after tenders than he used to. He was asking far more searching questions than he had previously thought possible and understood their needs much better, which made a big difference when it came to knowing where to put the extra focus when completing quotes.

He smiled; it was really just about making sure that you were being truly relevant to the customer.

He had to make Robert see that.

Sam glanced at the time, still early, but the managers should be mostly in. He picked up a notepad and pen and headed out to find them; he needed some help. Time to figure out how Bill could help.

Ray Carter, the Purchasing Manager, wasn't in his office down in the store's area but he found Raj Patel, the Fabrication Manager searching through the racks where they stored the welding wire.

"Hello Sam, you wouldn't know where Ray hides the flux cored hard surfacing wire, would you?"

"If you asked me for anything else I wouldn't have a clue but that one I do. I helped him unload some the other morning. It's under the shelf near the shop entrance. "

"Thanks. The only downside to coming in early is that there is usually no one in the stores until 8 a.m."

"But it pays to get an early start on the day," said Sam.

"That is so true. If everything is set up before the tribe arrives, there are fewer delays and nonsense to deal with later. Since we have been getting jobs that suit us better, things are running smoother than ever. You should see our labour productivity stats! Never been better."

"That would be useful to see," said Sam. This was precisely what he needed, and he hadn't even had to dig to find it!

He felt a sense of excitement.

"If you help me load this drum of wire onto this trolley, I'll show you," said Raj.

The drum was heavier than Sam remembered, but between the two of them it was soon on the trolley and Sam was following Raj to the welding bay where it was needed for one of the jobs Sam hadn't even needed to compete for.

The chart on the wall said it all. It tracked the number of man-hours per job against the value of the jobs done, and it was clearly starting to trend upwards, despite the fact that Sam had reduced the prices quoted.

"If we can keep that going, it's got to help," said Raj.

"We just need a bit more volume and some bigger forward orders," said Sam.

"And more work like we have right now," Raj added.

"Can you email me a copy of the chart?"

"I am just about to update it; I'll send you the latest version in an hour if that's okay with you?"

"Perfect, thanks."

Sam turned to continue his search and then turned back to Raj.

"Hey Raj, I have a visitor coming tomorrow morning around 9.30 a.m., you might like to meet him. He's where our new approach comes from. His name is Bill James."

"9.30? I suppose I could take an early break, I'll need a cup of tea by then."

"Great, I'll send you an invite."

Sam left nodding to himself; a plan was beginning to take shape. It was relevant to people like Raj who were affected by the changes Sam was making. Now he had to find Rod Hyndman, the Estimating Manager.

Sam poked his head around the door of estimating and saw that Bascar was already in, working on an estimate for a tender.

"Hello Bascar, how's the cold? Is Rod around?" Sam asked.

"Down to a few sniffles now and I quite enjoyed a day or two away. I think Rod is in the tea room, always likes to start his day with a coffee," he replied, without looking up from what he was doing.

"Thanks," said Sam, closing the door and heading to the tea room. "Robert isn't happy," said Rod as soon as Sam entered the room.

"I know, but things are slowly getting better," said Sam.

"He read me the riot act yesterday about getting tenders out on time. He almost had a heart attack when he asked about what prices we were charging. It didn't seem to matter that they are a reflection of our actual costs for that type of work, as we discussed. At least we are winning more tenders as a percentage of those we put in, which means my people are wasting less of their time."

"Robert is under pressure from the bank to get cash flow, so he's panicking a bit," said Sam, "He tackled me after talking to you."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Could have given you a call and warned you." Rod sat down at a table with his steaming cup of coffee. Sam headed to the machine and made himself one. "At least we are all in this together," said Rod.

"Do you have some time tomorrow morning around 9.30 a.m.?" asked Sam.

"I never have any time, you know that Sam. And it is all your fault for sending so many tenders to us!"

Sam laughed, "Better to be busy than not." he replied, "The right sort of busy anyway. But seriously, I have Bill James coming to visit, and I thought you might like to meet him. The new approach I'm using is based on some stuff I learnt from him."

"Okay, can't do any harm to hear about the sales voodoo you use."

"Any chance you could formalise a few figures around your more efficient production of tenders? And maybe the increase in tender acceptance as a ratio of tenders presented, that sort of thing?"

"You mean in my spare time? How about I send you the dates, and you work the figures?"

Rod left, and Sam sat sipping his coffee alone. Now all he needed to do was catch up with Ray Carter and get Robert there.

"My security system tells me that you helped steal a roll of welding wire from the stores," said a voice behind him.

"Guilty as charged," he replied, playing along with Ray.

"Raj said you were looking for me?"

"Again, guilty as charged," said Sam.

"So what's up?" Ray asked.

"You know we have been more selective on what we tender on, right?"

"Yes, I think you are trying to put me out of business! There isn't much demand for some of the stuff I am carrying in stock."

"That's because we are trying to get jobs which fit our core capability, the jobs that we know we do well and can make money on."

"Well once it's bedded down, we may be able to reduce how much stock we hold of the more esoteric stuff."

"Which lowers our overheads?"

"Yes, in fact, I'm having second thoughts about filling that vacancy I have in purchasing. So, what were you after me for anyway?"

"Tomorrow morning I have a visitor, Bill James, coming who you might like to meet. It's his sales process I have been using, which is why we have the style of work we now get coming through."

"Purchasing is a bit quieter, and I am always happy to welcome something new. Just send me an invite and I'll see how it fits."

"I know you, and you know your figures. If you did not employ another purchaser that would save you quite an overhead wouldn't it?" Sam asked.

Ray nodded. "Yeah, it would."

"And if you could streamline your stock holding you could nail down some sharp pricing and lower stock levels couldn't you?"

Ray nodded again.

"I know this is a big favour to ask with such a busy day ahead, but an idea of those figures would go a long way tomorrow morning," said Sam with a hopeful smile.

"Well...Okay, as long as you stop stealing rolls of welding wire," said Ray, laughing as he left the room.

Sam caught him at the door as a thought struck him. "The stock that you are not moving, any chance you can return some of it for a credit?"

Ray looked thoughtful before saying, "Already thinking on that. Yes, some of it. More figures for tomorrow around helping cash flow I am guessing?"

"What can I say? Guilty as charged!"

Sam went back to his desk and noted the clock said it was a little after 8 a.m. Robert would be in soon, and he wasn't sure how he was going to pitch him coming to meet Bill.

He glanced at his phone, which had been left on his desk. He had missed a call from Penny. Sam bit his lower lip as he switched his thinking away from Robert and onto Penny and their conversation. He hoped she was still as supportive in the cold light of day. He knew the news would sink in and have an effect. Penny liked her world stable and predictable.

He rang her back and found she had been planning. It was like her to start budgeting and testing how much they really needed. Sam was extremely grateful for it.

It is easy to forget the strengths of others and really pretty dumb not to work with them.

Chapter 14

"I can't believe that you are messing around with 'sales gurus' while our business is on the brink!" said Robert, an edge of exasperation in his voice.

What was it that Rebecca had said to him when he said he wanted to invite Robert to meet Bill James?

"Now is not a good time."

"But it's important," he had replied, which was met with a sigh and "I'll book you in for five minutes at 2 p.m., good luck."

The 'good luck' had sounded ominous, like it was a warning rather than a genuine wish. He hadn't really picked up on it, but now he understood what she meant.

He wracked his brains trying to work out how else he could approach this; what would Bill do? He remembered Bill's advice about being prepared and planning this call.

He wished he had now!

He swallowed hard as he looked into Robert's piercing eyes and took the plunge.

"Doing more and getting less wasn't working. What we are doing now is working, and that's what I want to show you. It's not about sales gurus, it's about results!" He was using Robert's own language to create relevance. At least Sam hoped he was.

It took a moment, but Sam realised that Robert looked like a beaten man with nothing else to lose. Robert fixed his gaze on a tall tree in the far corner of their yard; it wasn't even a seedling when he'd first started here but he wasn't thinking about that, he was trying to contain the desperation he felt at the position they were in.

Finally, he turned to Sam and said, "What time do you want me there?"

Sam left Robert still standing looking out of the window. Even though Robert had said he would be there, he didn't really feel like celebrating; there was still a lot to do, and they were all on the same side. Seeing Robert like that made him realise how much pressure the man was under.

Sam walked back to his office preoccupied. He didn't notice the message on his phone until he placed it on the desk. It was from Penny. Actually, she had left several messages as ideas would come to mind, and he had happily listened to all of them and been thankful she was on his side. But right now he had enough to worry about without anything extra, and if it had been urgent, she would have phoned anyway.

He pushed the messages from his thoughts and worked through checking his email. Sam had been expecting to hear about a contract, but nothing had come through yet.

He sighed deeply. It wasn't a good sign.

He started working through his in-tray. There seemed to be more tenders than usual, and most of them were the kind of work they were good at doing and on which they made money. He was on the third one when he saw the due date; it was tomorrow. How had that happened? Had he missed it? He checked the date received stamp that Rebecca put on all incoming mail. It was only received yesterday!

That was almost impossible, how could they expect a response so quickly? It wasn't even a small project. He looked at the name of the company who had sent it to him. He had heard of them, but they hadn't done any work for them before. He wondered if it had been sent late by error and if an extension was possible?

One lesson he had learned was that it was okay to ask the question – so he did. He picked up the phone and called the person whose name was on the letter.

"Mark Crimmins," said the voice at the other end of the phone.

"Hello Mark, this is Sam, I'm calling about tender GX 41-112. We just received it in the mail and were wondering if there was some mistake given the closing date?"

"No, no mistake. We have received a couple of tenders, but one of our other suppliers said that you were best for that kind of work. We realised you weren't on our tender distribution list so I sent it to you just in case you can do something quickly."

As the words soaked in, Sam realised that the strategy was working, they were getting known for what they did well, and others were recommending them!

"Well, thank you, Mark," said Sam, momentarily at a loss for words.

"You are welcome; will you be able to get the tender in?"

"Yes," said Sam.

He didn't know why he said it, or how he was going to do it, he just knew he had to.

"Great, I look forward to getting it," Mark replied.

As I am just going through this for the first time now, would it be okay to call again if I have any questions?" asked Sam. He was told that would be fine.

Before saying goodbye Sam remembered to ask who had recommended them and was gratified with the response. It seemed Mark and Estelle were long-term friends and she had said that he had impressed when they met.

He hung up making a mental note to thank Estelle. Bill had commented that few people say thank you and to do so was not just polite but likely to get that person recommending them again.

Sam stared at the tender wondering what he had just agreed to. He had until 5 p.m. tomorrow. He would have to deliver it himself. He took a deep breath before picking up the document and heading towards estimating and Rod Hyndman, the Estimating Manager. This was not going to be easy. He had a vision of Rod's unimpressed face as he approached the door.

The estimating office seemed quieter than usual as he looked around. He couldn't see Rod anywhere.

"Any idea where Rod is?" he asked Bascar.

"Gone; he took half a day off, something to do with the family."

Sam felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. No Rod meant no estimate. Even if he worked on it himself all night he wouldn't be able to get it done, he just wasn't familiar enough to do it quickly.

"You look like your favourite cat has run away from home," said Bascar.

"Almost," said Sam, "I have a very urgent tender to get out."

"When is it due?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

Bascar let out a low whistle.

"Is it a simple one?" he asked.

"It's like a lot that we do, but it's a big job."

"Doesn't mean anything, the biggest jobs can be very easy to cost if it's stuff we do all the time, you know, no material quotes to chase up or weird bits to try and price out."

"Can you have a look at it for me?" Sam asked, thrusting the document at Bascar.

He saw Bascar think for a moment, but the 'lost my favourite cat' look of desperation on his face must have convinced him because he nodded and took the document from him.

"Give me half an hour, and I'll let you know if it's possible. You may have to tell me what I put aside to get it done, okay?"

"Thanks and yes," said Sam, though the churning feeling in his stomach didn't go away.

He went back to his office and sat back down at his desk. He remembered the message from Penny and, feeling a little guilty, opened it up to have a look.

Let's celebrate, want to join me for lunch at the Brair at 1 p.m.?

He liked the Briar, it was a great little cafe that he and Penny often used to go to when he had more time. He also appreciated that Penny was reaching out to him. He looked at his watch, but it was already 2 p.m., so he had missed lunch, not that he had time anyway and he wondered what was there to celebrate?

He sent back a quick message apologising for being so late in replying.

He started to work through the date information that Rod had sent to him, so he had some ammunition for tomorrow; it was going to be a late night regardless of what Bascar came back with.

He almost had the spreadsheet finished when Bascar phoned.

"You are going to be pleased," said Bascar. "I wasn't sure at first, but something was familiar about the job, we priced it about two years ago for another company; must have been using us to get an indicative price for the project as a whole."

"So that means.....?"

"It means I can almost copy it across, just a few little things to change, update some pricing and you have something to hand in!"

Bascar sounded very pleased with himself, and Sam agreed.

"Thanks, Bascar. That's amazing. When can I have it?"

"By lunchtime tomorrow if you can settle Rod down for me changing jobs."

"I'll buy you lunch to celebrate," Sam replied, feeling a pang of guilt at having missed the invitation from Penny.

He would have to try and get home earlier tonight, but first, he needed to call Bill, to let him know he had invited a few more people.

He remembered a comment from Bill about appreciation.

"Bascar," he said, "I really do appreciate this flexibility. It will make a big difference to the company."

Bascar sounded a little taken aback but acknowledged the comment and signed off. Later in the day when he went to pick up the proposal, Bascar was positively beaming.

Penny must have been listening for his car because she met him at the door when he got home, which was unusual.

"Guess what?" she asked.

"What?"

"No, you guess," she replied.

Sam was tired but was also appreciating Penny's playfulness. "Jess won something at school.....?" he ventured.

"No, even better, I have a job!"

"You do?" he said, knowing how inadequate those words sounded.

"Yes, isn't that great?"

"Yes, but where?" he asked.

"At the Orthodontists'; they needed a receptionist and gave me the job and even better.....we get Jess's orthodontics at staff discount prices!"

"That is great!" he said, feeling even guiltier for not having lunch with her. It wouldn't make up for him losing his job, but it meant they could breathe a little easier. But he was not born yesterday and produced the bar of her favourite chocolate he had picked up on the way home. It earned him a kiss on the cheek and a warm hug.

It had been a while since she last had a job and he could feel her excitement.

"Maybe we should go out to celebrate," he said.

"Paul has rugby practice, but we could order in some pizza?" she replied, smiling.

"Pizza it is!" he replied, knowing why he loved her. This day was turning out better than he had thought.

He realised the relief he felt and the stress he had been under as he walked down to the bedroom to get changed, fighting back a tear of relief. He would have to be careful as he had been under a lot of pressure.

He decided that later he would talk to Penny and get some of it out.

He did. It helped a lot.

Chapter 15

The room was a little crowded, but that didn't really matter. It occurred to Sam that they rarely got together as a group. Maybe that was symptomatic of being under massive pressure to reduce costs and get work out the door. But they were all here now. Did that mean that they were feeling a little less pressured, or even more so?

Bill had arrived early which gave them time to discuss who was coming to the meeting and he introduced them as they arrived. He was surprised when Rebecca arrived pushing a tea trolley, complete with a plate of shortbread biscuits. Sam certainly appreciated her support. Maybe she knew how much effort he had been putting into making things work. Now they just had to wait for Robert who Sam knew would arrive precisely on time as he usually did.

Right on cue, Robert arrived and looked a little surprised to see so many people there. Sam introduced him to Bill and the discussions going on around the table naturally seemed to come to a conclusion.

Sam outlined the reason for being there briefly and quickly turned the conversation over to Bill. He was feeling a little out of his depth and was happy to do so. He also realised how much more nervous he would have been if he had not done as much preparation as he had done.

"I think I have introduced myself to everyone," said Bill, "but in case I haven't, I am Bill James, and I have to say how I appreciate you all being here when time is precious."

Sam glanced around the room; everyone looked interested, except Robert who was sitting with his arms crossed over his chest.

Bill addressed Robert directly. "Robert, I am an outsider looking in and want to be respectful of the family history that has seen this firm succeed for decades. That sort of history has weight to it as people often feel the previous generation looking over their shoulder, almost as if to judge how the current leader is safeguarding the family legacy."

"Sam feels it too and has found some ideas he really thinks could help, and I am only here today to try and put a framework around what he is trying to achieve."

"Scepticism is a healthy thing to have as we should all ask quality questions to uncover quality answers. But cynicism for its own sake can pull down good ideas. So it is important to offer proof as well as ideas. Wouldn't we all agree?" concluded Bill and was met with nods from around the table.

Bill continued, "In sales, it is easy to lose sight of the rest of the organisation and the role they play, so today is a good chance to reconnect and appreciate what it is you do to make everything a success."

Bill paused, before he continued, "Sam has told me a lot about you, and I am sure you know he has been changing a few things in sales over the last few months. When we talk about sales, people often think there is some magic bullet to get people to buy, some technique, some trickery... but in reality, it isn't like that. You only have to look at yourself to know that. How many of you like pushy salespeople? Pressure to make a decision before you want to? Or the feeling that you are not getting the full picture?"

Bill looked across the faces waiting for any indication that anyone enjoyed this style of sales, but there was none.

"That's what most people think too. But if we are ready to buy, and just need to know a few more details then we are happy to see the salesperson, aren't we?"

This time there were nods from around the room.

"If they seem to know what you want and present the information you need in a way that makes it easier for you, are they being relevant to you?"

"And could I ask which you prefer; someone who tries to fake that they know something and thinks they are fooling you, although you can see right through them. Or someone that acknowledges that they are not sure and will go and find out for you. That is simply being genuine and real."

Sam was happy to see Robert nod on this last one. He seemed to be drawn in despite the firmly crossed arms.

"So being real and being relevant are both things we want. If the salesperson tried to sell you something you didn't really want or something inferior, you would think he was neither being real or relevant, wouldn't you? That is at the crux of what Sam has been doing. He has been trying to be real with and relevant to your customers."

"Are you saying we weren't before," asked Robert.

"I don't know," Bill replied, "but did you ever take on jobs you weren't really expert in?"

"That's just part of being in this kind of business," replied Robert with an edge to his voice.

"It is important to distinguish between an honest endeavour and someone deliberately trying to con someone. I think we all know that there is nothing but honest endeavour coming from this organisation. But is that the point?"

"Even with all that honest intent, what would happen to your reputation in the client's eyes if they work out you are trying to fake it to make it? What happens to the level of trust between you and the likelihood you will have another tender looked at seriously?"

Robert levelled a straight-faced stare at Bill but did not answer.

So Bill continued. "In today's world, we are all transparent. You are online as individuals and as a company for the entire world to see. Does your message show your potential clients how you can solve their problems or does it simply try to sell or bombard with 'look at us and how great we are' rhetoric?"

"Can they get a sense of your history and the passion that makes you unique or is it all facts and features?"

"Does your message to the market show clearly where you excel or does it look like you are trying to be everything to all people? That sort of mixed message makes people nervous."

"But it's not just about being relevant, or about the product or service you provide, it's about things as simple as making sure that the tender is complete. If you leave something out, you are not being respectful or relevant to their needs."

"And if Sam didn't send us so many tenders with tight timelines, things wouldn't get missed out," said Rod.

Bill nodded understandingly. "Rod, you run the estimating arm don't you? What sort of things slowed down estimating?"

Rod held up his hand and started to count off things on his fingers.

"The volume of tenders, the complexity of some, having to chase subcontractors for prices on things we don't do that are part of the job, having to track down prices on unusual materials, among other things."

Bill nodded, "And have things changed?" he asked.

Rod hesitated, wondering why he had spoken up so strongly, maybe it was just the knowledge that things were on such a knife edge at work.

"Well, yes," he replied.

"So it is getting easier to do the quotes? With more accuracy and confidence that the job can be done at a profit?" Bill prompted him.

Rod nodded.

"Which means they get out quicker. I wonder how much quicker?" Bill asked.

"I can tell you that," said Sam, pleased he was prepared and that he had got the information from Rod.

He activated the screen on the wall behind Bill, which he had hooked his computer to before they started and pulled up a graph.

"On the bar graph, the red bar shows the hours to complete over the last twelve months by value of project. As you can see it has been going down over the last few months relative to value."

"And why is that?" asked Bill.

"Because we are not pricing tenders in areas we aren't experts in, that means less odd materials to get prices on and fewer subcontractors, which also used to cause us a hassle with getting things out on time."

"You can say that again," said Raj who usually bore the brunt of dealing with subcontractors.

"So what you are saying Rod, is that the work you get to price now is relevant to your needs? That it plays to your corporate strengths?" said Bill.

"Yes, I guess so."

"There just isn't enough of it," Robert added.

"But what we are doing is less of a hassle." said Raj, "Things just flow through the shop, no hold ups waiting for stores to order stuff, nothing."

"I have to admit that things are much easier in the stores. I think we can manage without getting that extra staff member," Ray Crater, the Purchasing Manager, chipped in. "And I have been doing some numbers," he brandished some sheets of paper before continuing, "if this continues we should be able to reduce our stock levels on the unusual items we just have to carry in case we need them. I am also looking into what can be returned for a credit, which will help cash flow in the short term."

The mention of cashflow got Robert's attention.

"Our tender conversion rate has also gone up," said Sam, flashing another graph on the screen.

"Has your approach to the customers changed?" Bill asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Yes, I am focussed on what we can do, and I am open about that with prospects; I don't pretend we can do just anything that comes through the door."

"But we can," Robert replied.

"Yes, we can." Sam answered, "But not without higher costs than we were allowing for. There is less profit in those jobs and a lot of unforeseen hassles that we cannot effectively or actively track. We do not really know how much impact they have."

"It's true," said Raj, "We don't have cost overruns anymore. And I can work out the hours saved if you would like but there are quite a few each week. Last month we had a part from a subcontractor that was not made to the right measurements. It took me hours on the phone to get them to come and remake it. We had to ship the part back at our cost, take the project off the production line, wait a week for the new part and set it all up again. I reckon we lost at least twelve hours because of it."

"A good friend in Australia, Big **Dave Staughton**, once told me that one of the keys to being successful in today's market is moving from AAAA to TTTT." Said Bill.

The blank looks he got were expected, and he continued.

"It's moving from doing, Anything for Anyone at Any time for Any price to doing this Thing for These people at This Time and at This price. When you specialise, the market gets to know what you do, and when they need one, they will know you are the company to go to. They trust you to deliver in this area."

"So being real is paying off for you, Sam?" said Bill and Sam nodded, "And it sounds like your reputation for reliability as a supplier has gone up too? There is just one more thing, and that is relationships, is there any view you have on that Sam?"

"Only that now we actually have relationships. We were throwing tender documents at company's and missing simply because they did not really know who we were and had little confidence. I have been trying to visit and understand the needs of the people who put out tenders, making sure we are relevant and real so they can trust us. In fact just yesterday someone sent us a tender because someone else mentioned that we were experts at what we do. It's hard to be seen as an expert when you do everything and anything." Sam replied.

Sam had a further thought and added it to the table.

"Robert, you already know the value of relationships. It is one reason you play golf. To make sure our relationship with key people in other organisations and the marketplace as a whole are good."

Robert provided Sam with a look that said 'I know what you are trying to do' and refocused on the discussion. However, the point was not lost on him.

"After all, there is no point climbing the ladder to success if it is leaning against the wrong wall, is there?" added Bill.

Bill turned to look directly at Robert. "Imagine going to a fair and getting a free ball to throw at a coconut shy. If someone told you the coconuts on the left were glued in, but the ones on the right would fall if you hit them; where would you aim that one ball?"

"You would obviously aim at the ones you could knock down," responded Robert.

"You are absolutely right. Sam is simply aiming at the coconuts that he has more confidence that he can knock down. He has reviewed what your organisation does well. He's found what makes money and loses money, and what is easy to implement or more difficult and also what the clients are actually looking for and willing to pay for. As a natural extension of that, he has reviewed which clients he should be targeting. He is trying to aim at the right coconuts because he knows you just have to win – and you never will by throwing at the wrong ones."

"This is simply a healthy exercise that every organisation has to do once in a while to make sure they are on the right track and putting all their efforts in the right place. Especially when you cannot spend time on RFP's that you will never win."

"Sam is also reviewing how he approaches those people to maximise the number of contacts, possibilities and profitable outcomes. As part of that review, he's found that he would like to try to evolve some aspects of the sales process."

"That said there are also definitely some aspects of the business that will never change and never should. They are solid principles based on years of experience and practical application. They have their place and are proven."

Robert nodded in agreement, the first real movement he had made since Bill started talking.

"We need to try, test and adjust," added Bill.

The entire group was looking thoughtful and taking in what was being said.

"Well words with an R at the beginning are cropping up a lot, and that's what this approach to sales is all about," said Bill. "Perhaps I should go into them a little more..."

Bill explained that buyer's behaviour and the sales process has changed more in the last five years than at any other time in history. It was not at all unusual for organisations, just like this one, to be striving hard to succeed but to be falling behind.

Bill continued "The fact is that we have to do business at both levels – the head level and the emotional level. As human beings, we are hard-wired to react emotionally faster than we are to thinking about what we are going to do.

"That means we have a feeling about something before we have created a rational and logical argument about that same thing. This forms a frame of reference through which everything else we hear or see falls."

"This is not to say that a logical and well thought out presentation is not absolutely necessary because it is. Someone can be positively disposed towards you but decide not to use you for a logical reason. The key is a balance of both these things."

"Sam has been utilising a programme of ideas we call the '*4 R's to Rocketing Results*' that combines all this together."

"The first two R's really do deal with the emotional side of a buying decision. Being '*Real*' and '*Relating*' serves that aspect that is needed to appeal to your client on the emotional level.

Bill explained the concept of being real and then asked Robert.

"Have you ever had anybody try to sell you something, and you just knew instinctively they were exaggerating the truth? Or maybe there was just something about them you didn't trust?" Bill asked Robert directly.

"Sure," replied Robert "it happens all the time with young guys who try to come and sell me using typical old sales techniques that I know better than they do."

"So what was your reaction to that?"

"They don't stay in my office for long," said Robert.

"And I had a young guy come in here just a couple of weeks ago trying to convince me to use a new attachment that had been created to add to an existing machine. You only had to look at it to realise it hadn't been made of a high enough grade or with enough steel content to last longer than five minutes. But he was trying to tell me it had a five-year warranty!" Ray chimed in. "They didn't hang around too long either. I told him I thought their idea was not likely to work and showed them the door."

Bill nodded. "What you both did was disconnect from that client because they were trying to represent something to you that was false or representing it to you in a false way. The fact of the matter is that we can spot the falseness and we emotionally move away from it. We just don't feel comfortable."

"What they've unwittingly done is create a frame of reference for you that says, 'I'm not honest, and I don't know what I am talking about and my product is not good enough.' Once they have done that, it becomes tough work for them because everything they say is suspect as far as you're concerned."

"Robert, did you have a look at the offer that was being made by the salesperson in front of you?" asked Bill.

"No, I didn't! I just showed him the door as soon as I could," replied Robert.

"Ray, did you look at any of the testing or information that was being provided to see if that item might have done the job?" asked Bill.

"To be honest, I didn't. I just kind of knew that it didn't look like it was going to work and I didn't have the time to muck around," replied Ray.

"We make frames of reference around people in seconds and then we tend to stick to them. What you both did is very human, and it is emotionally led. This is why we cannot afford to take the emotional component away from our business presentations. It is also why relationships are so important, because of this emotional component to every sale."

"Even tenders have an emotional component." Bill continued. "Potential clients have a feeling about your company, its reputation in the marketplace, past experiences with you and what other people they trust say about you. All this is an emotional response and sets the scene for the whole tender document – before they even open it."

"Sam, you said you got a quote very recently from someone who rang you. Is that right?"

Yes," said Sam, "they told me they had heard we were good at doing the job and we had been highly recommended by somebody else."

"That was also an emotional decision by the person who decided to make contact with Sam. Someone had recommended you, and he trusted that person enough to give you a call and ask you if you would like to tender for a job."

"Now the other two R's are based more on logic. That person that contacted you for the quote also would have asked whoever it was that recommended you if you were '*reliable*' and if you were '*relevant*' to what they wanted. Obviously they got a yes answer to both."

"Reliability is about the reputation that precedes you in the market. What Sam is trying to do is align your reputation with your strengths so that people know you as being the company to go to if they want certain things manufactured. It looks like it is starting to bear fruit with this person coming through the door looking for a specific job and having heard that you are very good at that."

"If you are looking for someone to diagnose a cold then you might well go to a GP. But if you are looking for someone to operate on your back then you would likely go to a specialist surgeon. It's interesting how the specialist surgeons make far more money and have a six-month waiting list."

"The fact is that when you try to be all things to all people, you end up being a master of nothing to everybody. If I could ask you, Robert, was that the objective when this company was first formed?"

"No," said Robert with significant passion. "We have a reputation for being high-quality designers and manufacturers."

"Okay, that makes sense." said Bill "But when you are focused on 100 different areas and tendering for everything, does that reinforce that message or does it make the company look like they will take any job if they can get it?"

Bill knew he was being provocative but he wanted to get a reaction from Robert. He got it.

"Now wait a minute. We have an excellent reputation in the marketplace, and we are known for the high quality of work that we produce. Everything we do turns out well, and we bring it in under time and under budget," declared Robert with conviction.

"Do you all agree with that?" asked Bill of the gathered group. They all looked a little sheepishly at one another, not wanting to be the first to say anything, and the silence got longer.

Robert looked around the room and demanded, "well?"

"On the whole, we are very good at what we do," said Ray, "but it is hard to keep things on budget and on time when we deal in areas that we don't really know well. If we're buying materials that we don't usually buy, we pay more, and we have to go through the pain of sourcing them." Pausing for a moment. "But, If we're manufacturing items that we do not have a lot of experience in then, there is always a learning curve. But we do get them out on time, and we quote a price, and so it must be under budget, at least as far as the client is concerned, even if it's not very profitable to us. But I think we have a great reputation in the marketplace, and we can be proud of what we've achieved."

Robert gave an acknowledging nod and an approving look.

"But you are noticing now with the change that Sam's bringing in that you are starting to do more of the work that is a natural fit? You are spending less time running around looking for other materials, and you are bringing things more easily into completion on time and with a reasonable profit margin?" asked Bill.

There was a consensus among everyone in the room as Robert looked on.

"So what does your client see? When your client picks up a tender from you in the right area, they can very quickly research your company online, and with others, they know that you have the right reliability factor to deliver the goods. You then form the right frame in their heads for them to be positive towards your tender. This is important because now they're looking for reasons to keep you in the race and not reasons to knock you out of it."

"When you are relevant to the market and what the market is looking for people naturally start to gravitate towards you. You say the right things in the tender, use the right language, and you represent yourself as the right organisation to do the job. This is a great place to be."

"Obviously there is a lot of merit for your organisation in doing the relevant work. Every one of you has demonstrated that your jobs are becoming easier and more profitable as you are getting work that suits your set up here, your machinery, your expertise and your previous experience. By aligning yourselves that way, you're starting to get a reputation in the market as the go-to guys for that type of work. That's really powerful."

There were nods and general agreements right around the whole table, and RP sat with a thoughtful look on his face.

"Okay," said Robert "I didn't get to run a business for a long time without recognising some good points when I hear them. The fact that you all made the time and that Sam has orchestrated this meeting, (this last said with a significant look in Sam's direction), probably pre-empts my next question, but I want it spelt out clearly."

"I want to confirm something here and now. Do you guys all think that Sam is moving in the right direction? Do you think we are getting better jobs that better suit us, and we are making better profits?"

The group looked at each other a little nervously as it was a brave man that would say 'yes' first.

Eventually, it was Rod that spoke up. "I've got to say that I thought Sam was nuts when he first started this stuff but I have noticed it in my department. We're getting more done. We're producing quality work. I think we are becoming more profitable and it seems to make sense to me."

One by one the others gave tentative confirmation about the direction they were moving in.

Robert looked at them all one at a time. "I hired you guys because you were good at your jobs and I'm not ignoring your opinion, but I've got to say I'm still not convinced. All I know is I've got a meeting with the bank coming up real soon, and if we don't have the numbers on the board, we will have some real problems. Backing Sam is a big call for me...and a big call for you guys too", he said looking at them pointedly, "and it's a really big call for you Sam."

Sam felt every eye in the room, and the weight on his shoulders suddenly increased. He had gotten what he wanted by way of support from the other heads, but now there was no doubt where the onus of success lay.

Robert had put it squarely on his shoulders.

"While Sam is leading the charge," said Bill "there is no doubt about the fact that he needs people to charge with him. The success of this organisation, like any organisation, depends on everybody in it doing what they've got to do. The great news is that everyone here can do it and it looks like you already are."

"No," said Robert meaningfully "everyone has to do it. It's that simple. I will run your ideas past my accountant as well and see what she says."

After the meeting, Sam thanked Bill for helping him and being there. "I would have hated to have tried that on my own."

"You would have been just fine. The research and everything you did was vital. It would have been impossible without it, and you managed to get all the right guys on your side before you started. You'd already set that up to be successful."

Bill looked Sam squarely in the eye. "You must have the courage now to push this through. Get out there and go for it and remember how much support you've got behind you from this organisation. You've told me about Penny getting a job, so it seems to me you've got support on the home front."

That last comment struck Sam with particular force. Once again he realised how much that home support meant. He was lucky to have Penny.

"Remember that someone has to give this the energy to go all the way. That someone is you. It is yours to drive. It's a question of caring enough to carry it through now Sam. You can do it."

Sam found himself feeling more confident about facing the challenge, but it was hard to ignore the small voice of worry that was sitting there waiting to be heard. It was still there when he arrived back at work the next morning and didn't go away over the next few weeks as he kept being selective about what tenders they bid on.

Chapter 16

"Forward orders are looking a little light," said Rod when Sam walked through the workshop on his way to his car for a meeting with a potential client who had called to say they had a problem and could he come and see them.

Sam remembered he had to be positive and provide the energy.

"I know, but we have a lot of quotes out, and we are going to hear back from most of them later this week."

Rod nodded, "I hope so Sam, or I will have to suggest that a few of my people use up some of their holiday leave. And talking of leave when is Robert back?"

"Thursday. I think Rebecca had to really twist his arm to go. He has been under a lot of pressure and hasn't been looking the best." Sam replied he didn't add that the bank was hassling him more than ever. Rebecca had said that there was now a call scheduled twice a week from Robert's personal business banker for updates.

"I don't think any of us are immune to the pressure, but at least we aren't killing ourselves for nothing. We make money on what we do now."

The drive was shorter than Sam thought. He had known roughly where the address was and had a vague idea of the company, but he hadn't thought they were a prime target for contact and he was busy with people who put out tenders so didn't have them on his list to visit and get to know.

They're an energy company, and any work they have was usually organised through a prime contractor who would break the job down into tenders that they would then bid on. Still, there had been an insistent quality in the tone of Aldo Ramirez's voice when he invited Sam to come and talk, so he had agreed even though there were a couple of tenders that he was working on.

Arriving with time to spare Sam reviewed one of their company brochures to see what he could learn about them. He had found several clients that they had in common from the testimonial section. He also knew that there were a number of areas they worked in that surprised him. He could see some products and services that they could be involved in and Sam stored this information away for his impending conversation.

In the FAQ section was an outline of how they provided their services. Sam noticed a similarity with some aspects of their own sales process. He wondered if he could align the two a little more closely when they met.

The man at the front desk handed Sam a visitors badge and told him he was expected. He was shown into what looked like a boardroom. 'There must be money in energy', he thought as he looked around at the modern furnishings and settled into one of the very comfortable chairs that surrounded the oval board table.

A comment Bill had made came to mind and he quickly stood up. First impressions count and lounging in a chair was not the one he wanted to make. He started to read the company vision statement on the wall. He was still doing so when the door opened.

"Sam, so pleased you came. I'm Aldo, and I hope you don't mind, but I have invited a few others to join us."

"No, not at all," said Sam.

He had been expecting an informal meeting in some small meeting room at best, but this was obviously something else. This was confirmed when no less than five people entered to join them. Sam realised they were going to go straight to the meat of the conversation and he mentally went up a gear and wished he had done more preparation.

Introductions were made, and business cards exchanged.

Sam arranged them in front of him on the table in order of where they were sitting so he could remember their names. He wondered what all this was about, especially when the title 'Legal Advisor' leapt off one of the business cards at him. He wished he had checked more carefully to see if they had done work before - were they about to be sued for damages?

His mouth was feeling dry, and he was pleased when he was offered water. What would Bill do? Relevance, honesty and connection!

"Aldo, I had expected a smaller and more informal meeting," Sam began. "We have some very busy people with specific titles around the table, so there is obviously something specific you have in mind. Could I suggest I forgo the usual intro on my company and give you the floor?"

Aldo nodded his appreciation. "Thanks, Sam. I appreciate your openness. What we are about to talk about is sensitive and mustn't go outside this room, which is why we need you to sign a confidentiality agreement before we continue."

The legal advisor slid a one-page document across the table towards Sam along with a pen. He scanned it quickly trying to gather his thoughts. It looked simple enough, so he signed it and slid it back. It might have been his imagination, but he was sure everyone relaxed a little as he did so.

"Thank you, Sam," Said Aldo. "You'll understand why we have to do this in a minute."

He paused and a screen on one wall lit up.

"This is our Bradley Sands project in Australia, you might have heard of it?"

Sam nodded. It was one of those mega gas projects that he never got anywhere near bidding on because the prime contractors always had their own international supply chains. Very closed door and political.

"This is the sensitive bit," said Aldo.

Sam waited expectantly while Aldo sipped some water. I wonder if he is nervous too, thought Sam.

"The project is significantly behind schedule, and contractually we must supply gas from the plant by a certain date, or we are subject to the non-performance clauses in place. Our own penalty clauses with the prime contractor haven't had any effect and last week we heard from a confidential source that they are probably going into receivership very soon, as in days," said Aldo.

Sam carefully kept his face neutral. Something huge was about to happen. He knew about the prime contractor, they were large and seemed bulletproof, and it was the last thing he had expected to hear. The others around the table were all focussed on him, and he realised he was still under some scrutiny. How should he handle this? No nonsense. Focus on brevity and relevance and be braver than he felt.

"Aldo, gentleman, I can appreciate the seriousness of the situation. I am here for a reason. How do we fit in and how can we help?" Sam asked and mentally held his breath and stored the dozen or so additional questions for the time being.

"There are some critical pieces of plant we wish to discuss." said a voice from the other end of the table. Sam looked down at the business cards. James Killick, General Manager Development, it said.

"Since we heard this might be happening, we actioned a project review including the supply side, and it has some holes. Some pieces of plant haven't even been ordered, and with the lead times out of Asia, this has become critical. Even if we could order them today, which we can't do, they are not going to get here on time."

"You mean because they haven't gone into receivership yet?" Sam asked.

"Yes. We have the out we need because all our contracts allow us to terminate if the contractor goes into receivership, so we have the option of taking over ourselves or finding someone else to take over the project, but that doesn't mean we can get the plant open on time."

"If they go into receivership, we will take over ourselves."

"At this stage of the project we can probably handle that, and we don't have time to go out to the market to find someone else, so we will keep the contracts going that are working and work on the ones that aren't."

"So what we want to know from you is, can you make and deliver the pieces of plant we need quickly?"

Mentally Sam screamed a big 'yes'.

More calmly he said, "My first instinct is to say yes. We specialise in plant componentry. You've done your due diligence on us and must like what you have seen enough to initiate this conversation, so I feel confident enough to give you a qualified yes, subject to some significant things!"

He realised he didn't even know what plant was required so added, "It really depends on what you want, and of course I need to do some homework at our end to be sure."

"I told you all we had to do was find the company with the reputation for being experts and reliable and go with them," Said James, looking self-satisfied."

"Can I look over the design drawings and do some costing's," said Sam, to qualify his answer. "I will need to confirm timing as this is obviously critical. We need to give you a final assurance of delivery, and I want to leave nothing to chance."

The qualifier seemed to please the men around the table.

"Of course, that is sensible." Said Aldo, "How quickly can you do that?"

"Right away," said Sam, thinking of the more relaxed atmosphere in estimating and mentally wincing at having to tell Penny he would be working some long hours.

He could see the appreciative looks around the table and wasn't feeling nervous anymore.

One of the other people at the table pushed a thick envelope towards him.

"Project documentation," said Aldo. "If they go into receivership next week, we need to be ready, and we will be."

"Is it a quote you want from us?" Sam asked.

Aldo shook his head, "Probably not. We are happy to work off detailed costings with an agreed tolerance. Put the time into production readiness."

"We know this is unorthodox," said the legal advisor, "So we are offering an alliance contract; you provide your material and labour costs, we add a margin and a premium if you deliver on time."

"A generous margin," Aldo added.

Sam's mind was racing now. "At some stage, I will have to bring in my managing director. When that is necessary or when you are comfortable the time is right, I will ask you to let me get another confidential agreement signed by him on behalf of the company so we can get all final points nailed down. What are your intentions on future work?"

"If it all works out we are happy to entertain you doing similar work on our projects in the future. Properly and competitively quoted of course," said Aldo.

"Paid on progress?" Sam asked, knowing their problems with the bank.

"Yes," said Aldo, "We know it's a lot to have to carry for a company your size. But remember you cannot repeat this to anyone, and that includes anyone at work, you will just have to say it's a possible tender, we can't afford for this to leak."

"I understand," said Sam his mind beginning to buzz with all the possibilities. "Can I ask why us?"

"We are well known to a number of suppliers but so are our contractors. It would be hard to keep this under wraps no matter what we try to do. Your organisation is small enough to value this project highly and big enough to make it happen. Besides, Tom over there has played golf with the owner and liked him." said Aldo.

When he got back into his car, he looked at the thick envelope and shook his head wondering if he was dreaming. So this is what happens when you are real and have a reputation! It was going to be a very long night; thank goodness Robert was away and wouldn't want to know what he was doing.

Sam shook his head again. All from a day on the golf course! Robert would not be able to deny the power of relationships after this.

Chapter 17

Sam didn't wait to get back to his office to open the project documentation envelope; he opened it in the car and quickly scanned the main pages. It was a big job, and he could see why they were so worried.

The piece of plant they needed made was a critical part of the overall project and not something you could buy off the shelf or something that many other companies could readily make. But it was exactly what they were good at, and the thought that they now had an expert reputation around that kind of work made Sam smile. He spent a moment coming up with the names of other companies that would have similar projects. If they got this right, there were certainly possibilities elsewhere in the market.

Raj looked at Rod and shrugged as Sam tore past them and ran up the stairs to his office two at a time. He couldn't wait to get started. This was exactly what they needed, and he wanted to give their new client every confidence in their ability to deliver. He was going to have to produce exactly the right information for them. He was going to have to be relevant.

"Either Robert has told him to clean out his desk, or he's found us some work," said Rod, grinning at the thought.

"Well we know if he goes, we're all gone," Raj replied.

Sam had left his phone in his car, so he didn't hear Penny phoning as it rang repeatedly. He had intended to call her to let her know he was working late but had become so absorbed in what he was doing that he had completely lost track of time.

It was only when he walked into the kitchen and saw a cold plate of food left out for him that he remembered what he had forgotten to do and grimaced at the thought.

He looked at the wall clock that informed him it was half-past two.

He decided to sleep on the couch rather than disturb Penny, a decision he would pay dearly for in the morning when he woke up with a stiff neck and a headache.

Sam was alone in the house when he woke. He looked at the time, nearly nine; he had better have a shower and some tablets for his headache and get to work.

Despite the tablets, his head was still pounding, and Sam winced as one of the welders started grinding some steel sending showers of sparks and shrieking sound cascading across the floor.

"Bit different this morning," said Rod to Raj as they watched Sam climb the stairs.

"Must have been a late night," Raj replied. "Looks almost as bad as Robert did."

Sam apologised to Penny and the children for not calling to tell them he had to work late, and he told them the bad news, that he had to work through the weekend on a very important job.

"So you will miss the barbeque at Amber and Tony's?" Penny had said.

It was more of a statement of resignation than a question, but he nodded and answered anyway, "Afraid so. Penny, I am sorry. I would come if I could."

He could see she had forced a smile on her face and he had appreciated her not taking him to task over it. Once again he was struck by how supportive she had been since he had told her about the situation. He was an idiot not to have had her support long before.

For a moment he wondered if it was all worthwhile, the long hours, the hassles with Robert, missing family time. Then he thought about all the people who depended on the company for their living, which included him, and promised himself that he would cut back on his hours as soon as they secured this contract. In fact, he might even take a holiday, after all, they wouldn't have to worry about moving to find another job, and it seemed ages ago since their last one.

The week sped by, and so did the weekend. Sam had to have a few 'hypothetical' conversations with Rod, Raj and Bascar and the others regarding how they would handle a large and urgent job. They were naturally curious about all the questions. These guys were not fools but he was gratified when they did not press him further – he had their trust, which was wonderful and also added more pressure.

Then Raj had said, "You know, we all realise that you bring in the jobs and we have to have faith that whatever you are doing will be in all our best interests. We are right behind you. Okay?" It had meant a great deal to Sam.

And the more he talked to them the more convinced he became that they could easily meet the timelines. The estimates he was coming up with for the job were bigger than he expected and once he added their usual margin they would move convincingly towards the black again, and with the other jobs trickling in they should be on a more solid footing for the near future.

He had become obsessed with the business news on his laptop and checked what seemed like every minute for any word on the receivership being announced. Then on Tuesday, it happened, first a call from Aldo saying there was about to be an announcement, then he watched it streamed live on the news site. He was excited and sad at the same time; excited because this was their big opportunity and sad for all the people employed in the contracting company because they would soon be out of work.

"As soon as the dust settles, I'll get the contract to you for signature, and we are back on track to completing the project," Aldo had said. "By the way, good work on the estimates, they came in close to what we expected."

"Now that the news is out, it is probably time I brief our CEO. I have been getting some inquisitive looks around here," said Sam.

He had been getting regular visits from Robert over the last few days, and the mounting pressure was easy to see.

"No problem" replied Aldo. "Let me know if there are any meetings needed, and I will connect the right people with the right people. I will send a new privacy contract. Talk soon." With that, he hung up.

Sam sat back in a mix of competing emotions as the news sunk in that this was really going to happen. He let the smile on his face widen as he slid back in his chair and stretched, he had been sitting too long.

He caught himself. There was still a contract to sign and possible last-minute negotiating so he would have to be at his best all the way to the finish.

But then again, this was not really the finish. It was only the start of what he hoped to be a lot of business.

Rebecca wasn't at her desk, and there was no sign of Robert either.

"Does anyone know where Rebecca is?" he asked at reception as he walked by, "or Robert for that matter."

"Robert has gone into the City, to the bank I think I heard him say." Ann, a new face at reception, told him.

"Thanks," he replied, but his mind was already racing ahead of him out the door.

He fumbled with his phone and almost dropped it in his haste. He needed to talk to Robert before he got to the bank. He had to know that they were about to have some serious business.

"Oh," said Ann's voice at his shoulder, "Rebecca has gone home, she seemed upset."

"Thanks" he mumbled. That must be it, Robert had told her he was going to the bank and that was the end of the company, the bank was going to foreclose! All that effort for nothing!

The call to Robert went to his voicemail. Did that mean he was already meeting with them and had turned his phone off? Who exactly did he meet with anyway? He began to panic as he realised how little he knew.

He wanted to jump into his car and race after Robert, but he didn't even know when he left or where he was. He spun around and raced back to reception.

"Hello, Ann, isn't it?" he said trying to keep his voice calm, so he didn't sound like a lunatic. "Do you think you can look up Rebecca's home number for me?"

Robert sat in his car for a long time, he had hoped he could keep the bank happy, their forward figures were trending upwards, but he knew it wasn't going to be enough. Maybe he could put a positive spin on things, but in his gut, he knew that nothing was going to help. What had Bill James said, you have to be real, and people knew if you weren't. Probably makes little difference now.

He looked at his phone, there was no signal being parked underground in the carpark. He looked at his watch, he was early. Maybe he would get a coffee at the café in the foyer. Better to sit there than wait upstairs in one of the tiny rooms where you felt like the walls were crowding in. He took a deep breath and got out of the car.

Sam had to ring three times and was on the verge of driving over to her place when Rebecca answered.

He asked if Robert had gone to the bank and she said, "I can't talk about it."

"Rebecca, we are about to get the largest contract we have ever had, and I think Robert has to know, it could change everything. Do you know where the bank is and who he's meeting with and when?"

"He's meeting at three, I'll go online and check his schedule and text you the address and who he's meeting with," she replied.

"Thanks," he said before hanging up. Rebecca had grasped it all in an instant, and there was no further argument. He appreciated how much depth there was to her, as a thought occurred to him. You probably never saw that depth in others until you were willing to show them the real and deeper you.

His heart was racing, his mouth dry, and after what seemed like an eternity his phone beeped and he opened the message from Rebecca and looked at his watch.

There was no way he could get to the city in time, and if Robert was going to leave his phone off, he was in big trouble. He tried Robert phone again, this time he answered.

Sam was so surprised he could hardly force a word out, finally he managed to say, "Robert....have you seen the bank yet?"

"Not yet, I still have a few minutes, but it's no use Sam I know you have done all you can but it's all coming too late."

"Robert we are about to get a multi-million dollar job."

"Have we got that in writing Sam, the bank won't listen to words anymore?"

"No, but I have a draft agreement."

There was a long silence on the other end of the call.

"You better tell me all about it, so it sounds like I know what's going on, but no guarantees they will buy it, Sam," said Robert. "Get that draft agreement sent to my phone right now."

He went through the story as quickly as he could, and as fully as he could without an updated confidentiality contract, aware that time was ticking down.

"Well, that sounds like our lifeline Sam. I'll be back at 5.30, will you still be there?"

"Yes," said Sam knowing that this was going to be the longest few hours of his life.

He sat staring at the news site; their new alliance partner had announced that they would be taking control of the project immediately and that all of their contracted delivery agreements would be met. It struck him that almost no one in the world would care less about this bit of news, but to him and the company, it dwarfed all other events.

He kept glancing at the time on the screen; it seemed to be creeping along slower than ever. He heard the roller door closing to signal that the workshop was closing. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He wondered if he should be clearing out his personal items from the office just in case Robert hadn't been able to convince them.

He opened his eyes at the sound of his door opening, he hadn't realised he had fallen asleep. RP came into the room and sat down opposite him.

"Well Sam, today I did something I never thought I would," he began, and Sam's heart sank as he waited for the fateful words.

"You did?" Sam replied, not knowing what else to say.

Robert nodded and looked at the floor.

"Something I've always sworn I would never do," Robert continued.

Sam swallowed hard.

"And I'm not happy about it Sam."

"Today", said Robert, "I put up my house up as collateral, and we have a reprieve from the bank." Robert's face split into a smile.

Sam found himself laughing as he realised that they had made it. They were going to be ok. Maybe it really was time to take Penny and the children on that holiday!

"Sam, it has been tough on all of us, and you have taken a big share of that, being in the position you are in. But you punched through it and came up with the goods when it mattered most. I appreciate it, and I won't forget it."

Sam felt the relief and gratitude for Robert's comments well up inside, and he could not wait to tell Penny, and the rest of the team.

"And Sam, all that sales stuff, it works doesn't it?"

"Yes Robert, it works because it means we treat people like we would like to be treated, not as objects to be sold to."

"Being Real really does get the deal, huh?" said Robert.

Epilogue

Rebecca sat and admired the flowers that graced her desk. She seemed to be getting a few gifts of appreciation now. While she tried not to let it show too much, she definitely approved. Although how Sam had found out about her favourite cinnamon biscuits was beyond her. He had been something of a pleasant surprise.

The big contract had created its own set of challenges, but they had pulled together and made it work. No one had missed the significance of that order and what it meant to the company and them individually.

The mood had changed. Doubt and uncertainty had been replaced by a busy optimism. New faces had appeared on the factory floor in the last few months, and that new Bernie was a God-send.

And the addition of a young guy that understood the software back to front and had experience in estimating stepped in and took all the presentation work off Sam. With a flair for design, the presentations had never looked so good. He seemed to thrive on creative administration and sorted out a client management system, did all the marketing layouts and created a consistent brand all the way through the organisation.

And, he pulled Sam up when he did not keep the standard. As a result, Sam looked great in front of the clients. To Rebecca's mind, professionalism and pride in the company were worthy traits indeed.

Sam himself had gained a lot of confidence. There was pride in his stride, and he had grown into the new Sales Manager title. The company was now known as a specialist in several markets that made them money. Aldo had been true to his word, and the sales pipeline looked healthy. Sam had leveraged their success and they were now starting to send components all around the South Pacific.

The additional training offered was also grabbed with both hands and when Robert had suggested a mentor for Sam, he had jumped at the chance. Robert had confided in her that he would likely retire in a year or two and that the company needed a good internal man for the role. An interesting thought, but time would tell.

In truth, she would probably retire with him. This firm was a passion for her. She felt like the brood mother and that it was her role to keep everyone in line – including Robert on occasion. But she could not see herself working on if he retired.

She was strolling around the upper floor and overheard Sam in his office on the phone. “No Penny, I have not forgotten the school play. It has been in my diary for weeks. What about us all going out for dinner first?”

She allowed herself a smile. Sam had confided that things were in a good place at home and he was certainly more relaxed. The family had gone on a holiday, and then he had gone on a school camp last month, and the big bonus from Robert had not hurt either. Surprisingly Penny had still taken the job at the orthodontist. It had become part-time, and she was thriving outside the family role.

She reflected that it was a good brood to be mother hen of. She glanced into Sam’s room and gave him a quick nod of acknowledgement and received a brief wave back.

As she left the room, she wondered, not for the first time, about the significance of the poster Sam kept on the wall.

It meant nothing to her, but he said it kept him focused.

It was simply a big letter 'R'.

Bill James Workshops.

3 Piece Sales The 3 Missing Pieces

There are many reasons why sales are not at the level you want (and need) them to.

We have found many times it can come down to three key areas;

1. **Commitment** to the sales process and the need to succeed.
2. **Connection** to clients quickly and deeply to bring a speedy and favourable outcome.
3. **Completion** is getting the job done and the relationship set for the future.

The following are a menu of ideas that act as a starting point to a tailored solution. We customise to ensure that your team can sell themselves, your company and your products and services.

In most cases businesses do not have to radically change their existing sales processes to achieve remarkable results – they just need the missing pieces put in place. Some of the subjects will look familiar but what we do with them is very different.

Tick the ones you feel would address a challenge your sales team are experiencing

Commitment

Selling in today's world	Modern theory, how buyers are buying, the changing role of sales, the need for 'integrity selling'.	
Why is selling so hard	Why we naturally shy away from selling, understanding the true 'us', how to sell as yourself, the 'Bob the Builder' system to change confidence, attitudes and resilience.	
The 4 basic skills	The 4 simple skills that form a foundation to integrity selling that allows your team to start selling as themselves.	

Connection

Preparation	Planning and knowing your 'why', setting sales goals, using a call planner, planning your day and week.	
Understanding the buyer/ Selling value not price	Personality, from features to benefits to influence, Creating a 'Value Stack' that fits each customer.	
Customer communication	Talking each individual customers language in a way that gains maximum response, pace, pitch, tone, language, jargon, choosing the right forms of communication.	
Telephone sales – inbound	Turning inquiry into income, connecting fast with prospects, how to move them to the next stage.	
Telephone calls – outbound	Prospecting 101, advanced calling that converts over half the time, relevance and quick wins, Making appointments,	

	gate keepers.	
Setting up the sale	Opening the appointment and getting 70% of the way to a sale in the first 3 minutes, moving straight past small talk, creating an approach every personality accepts.	
Positioning	How to frame your proposition, sell on value, framing yourself as the right person to deal with, qualifying.	

Completion

Uncover the needs they will buy	Questioning to uncover hidden motives, 3 key questions almost no one asks and should, crafting solutions and repositioning their language, stop shooting yourself in the foot!	
Forward momentum	Keeping the sales process rolling, being in control, summarising and next steps, creating solutions and gaining agreement.	
Objections	Pre-handling the common objections, Tipping the bucket, dealing with price, easy stepped objection handling process, specific objections worked through.	
Doing the business	Pre-closing from the beginning, controlling the momentum, trial closes, gaining easy agreement, specific ideas	
After the sale	Delivering on promises, tucking clients into bed, setting up for long term relationships.	
Cross and up selling	Laying the foundations for future sales, how to sell more even when they don't think there is anything they need.	

Key account management	Taking care of the best of the best.	
Territory management	Creating efficiency on the road, time management for sales people, doing the right thing for the right clients, priorities and planning, relationship management strategies.	

Which ones did you tick?

If you want to make a difference to your results a quick call or meeting will soon allow you to judge for yourself if 3 Piece Sales can provide the missing pieces to your sales jigsaw.

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"For people that don't like selling, but have to anyway"

While each case is different, many organisations we work with want to know about some of the outcomes we have achieved. The following are a few examples;

"After two months we have increased our conversion rate from call to appointment from 37% to 56%, a 51% increase which far exceeds our goal of 20%, and represents a return on investment on the training in the thousands of percent." -Les Seiler, Franchise Support Manager, Pit Stop Ltd

"Since using these techniques I have had huge success! I had my biggest month in sales last month and the conversion rate for getting a kitchen sale over the line has increased from 50% to 80%." -Josh Cooper, Qualified Joiner, Kitchen Consultant

"I have done three 'go ahead' deals in the last month worth \$50,000 that I attribute to the skills I learned during my day with Bill." -Simon Tansley, Designer

"Within 1 month every rep significantly increased their production." -CEO, Beauty industry

"We have gained \$3,000,000 in sales from our existing clients after your one day session in 3 months." -GM, Hygiene industry

"Bill's sales coaching has played a major role in us setting a new Australasian sales record in just 3 months" -GM, Power Supply industry

"The feedback has been so good that (those) that didn't get to see you have heard about you from those that did and are knocking on my doors saying, when can we have you back?" -Brownie Wijohn, Trade Coach, North Power Ltd

"Any sales force could gain from your ideas and I do not think the industry matters greatly. Anyone who wants to build and manage a relationship and then lead that relationship, to a successful sales conclusion would benefit." -John Mitchell Telecom NZ, Head of International Sales

"Over a period of 3 months our team become aligned as one sales team all pulling in the same direction, we broke a best ever sales in one of the territories 2 months running and an all-time record across the whole company in the 3rd month." -Gareth McKay Sales Team Leader Regal Electro

"I used just one of your ideas and it now accounts for 36% of our new business." -CEO | Jewellery industry

"We increased sales \$150,000 in 2 months with Bill's ideas around sales" -CEO, PR industry

"We have gained \$3,000,000 in sales from your one day session in 3 months." GM | Hygiene industry