Pre-Mortem Thinking

Idea In Short

Hold a premortem at the start of every significant project, before commitments harden. Tell the team that the project has failed, give everyone ten minutes to write down why, and collect the reasons around the table, starting with the leader. Convert the consolidated list into changes to the plan, named owners for the top risks, and early warning signals to track. The session takes about an hour and draws out doubts that people hold back in ordinary kickoff meetings. Schedule it before budgets are locked, because the value of the exercise lies in changing the plan, not in documenting concerns after the fact.

Projects fail at a high rate, and one reason is that people who suspect trouble often stay quiet. In the weeks after a kickoff, the team has announced its enthusiasm, the sponsor has set expectations, and anyone who raises a doubt risks being seen as obstructive. Gary Klein, a research psychologist who studies decision making in fast, uncertain settings, designed a technique that changes the social rules.1 This article explains how the premortem works, why it surfaces what ordinary reviews miss, and how to run one that produces changes in the plan.

Why kickoff meetings stay silent

In a typical kickoff, the team reviews the plan and the leader asks whether anyone has concerns. People who agree say nothing, and people who disagree weigh the cost of speaking against the benefit. The meeting often does not ask for concerns at all, which makes the silence worse.2 Over time, a group converges on a shared story in which the plan is sound and the schedule is realistic. That convergence is a form of groupthink, and it is comfortable precisely because nobody disrupts it.

The cost shows later. A dependency that three people privately doubted turns out to be the critical path, a supplier promise that no one believed collapses, and a key person leaves without a successor. When the project stalls, the team discovers that the information had

been in the room from the start. The challenge is to create a setting in which people can say what they already know.

How a premortem works

The premortem operates on a simple reversal. Instead of asking what might go wrong, the facilitator announces that the project has failed and asks what went wrong. The question gives permission, since a team member is no longer predicting a bad outcome and risking the leader's displeasure. The member is explaining a failure that, within the exercise, has happened. The technique counters groupthink by turning a discussion of threats into a constructive exercise rather than a confrontation.3

The Open University Business School frames the exercise around a single question:

> If this project fails, what will we wish we had thought about today?

Klein recommends doing the exercise at the beginning of a project, when it can improve the plan, rather than at the end, when it can only produce an autopsy.

Prospective hindsight

The mechanism is called prospective hindsight, which means imagining that an event has already occurred. Klein points to 1989 research by Deborah Mitchell, J. Edward Russo, and Nancy Pennington, which found that this framing raises the ability to identify correct reasons for a future outcome by about 30 percent. People generate more and better explanations when they treat an outcome as settled. The reasons tend to be more specific, because the mind works backward from a concrete failure instead of weighing abstract possibilities. Daniel Kahneman discussed the technique in Thinking, Fast and Slow and endorsed it as a practical remedy for overconfidence in planning.

Running one well

A premortem follows six steps in order:

1. Make sure everyone knows the plan before the session begins
2. Announce that the project has failed, in the past tense, with a vivid description
3. Ask each person to write, independently, every reason they can think of
4. Go around the room and collect one reason per person at a time until all are heard
5. Consolidate and rank the reasons by likelihood and severity
6. Revise the plan to address the top items and assign owners

Two details determine whether the session works. The first is the order of speaking. The leader should go first and be candid, since that sets the example for everyone else. The second is writing before talking, which protects quieter members from anchoring on the first voice they hear. Ask for specifics. A note that says the team runs out of time has little value, whereas a note that says design review takes three weeks and the plan budgets one tells the group exactly where to look.

What teams usually find

Consider a bank preparing to migrate a core payments system. The kickoff plan looks solid. In a premortem, the team imagines that the migration failed and writes down reasons. One person notes that the two engineers who understand the legacy data formats are not assigned full time. Another observes that the vendor's testing environment has never matched production. A third points out that regulatory sign-off typically takes longer than the plan allows. None of these points is exotic. They simply never reached the plan because nobody was asked.

The pattern is common. Premortems tend to surface resource gaps, unchecked assumptions about customers or suppliers, unclear ownership, and dependencies on other teams. They also surface cultural risks, such as a reluctance to report bad news. The Open University piece notes that the exercise is straightforward and works through simple prompts, which is part of its appeal.4

Facilitating the difficult moments

Most failures of the technique trace back to facilitation rather than to the idea itself. When a senior executive dominates the round, the group quickly learns that the exercise is theater, so the facilitator should collect written notes first and read them aloud without attribution if candor is in doubt. When the reasons arrive as generalities, such as poor communication or

unclear priorities, the facilitator should ask which meeting, which decision, and which person would have changed the outcome. When the team turns defensive, the facilitator can remind everyone that the failure is hypothetical and that the purpose is to improve the plan, not to judge its authors. A sponsor who responds to each item with a rebuttal should be coached beforehand to listen, record, and thank, because a single dismissive response can end the candor for the rest of the session. Finally, the facilitator should keep proposed solutions out of the first round, since discussing fixes too early crowds out the generation of reasons and shifts attention to the loudest remedy.

Turning the list into action

The exercise has value only if the plan changes. After ranking the reasons, the team should decide for each of the top items whether to prevent it, reduce its effect, or monitor it. Prevention might mean assigning a full-time engineer. Reduction might mean building a fallback environment. Monitoring means choosing a leading indicator and a threshold, such as a test failure rate or a slip of more than a week in a dependency. Name an owner for each and record the items in the risk register with a review date. Revisit the list at each major milestone, adding new reasons as circumstances change. The Premortem Technique chapter in Knowledge Solutions describes it as low in cost and high in payoff, and it suggests that it need take no more than one or two hours, preferably with the help of a facilitator.5

Where premortems fall short

The technique has limits. It cannot find risks that no one in the room can imagine, so it complements monitoring rather than replacing it. It can produce long, vague lists if the facilitator accepts generalities, and the same list can paralyze a team if it is never prioritized. Some leaders worry that opposition voiced during the session will threaten the plan, and that concern is fair when a sponsor responds defensively. A premortem also adds little to small, reversible tasks, where the cost of a mistake is lower than the cost of the meeting. The remedy in each case is discipline in the format: keep the session short, rank the output, and make the leader the first to speak.

- 1Performing a project premortem
- 2The premortem method
- 3Premortem

- 4The pre-mortem mindset: why smart leaders imagine failure before it happens
- 5The premortem technique

Summary

A premortem works because it changes what a doubt means. In a kickoff meeting, raising a concern can look like disloyalty. In a premortem, the same concern counts as a contribution, since the team has agreed in advance that the project failed and that the job is to explain why. Run it early, let people write before they speak, ask for specifics, and leave the meeting with a revised plan, owners, and tripwires. The exercise will not find every risk, and it cannot replace monitoring once work begins. It does give teams a low-cost way to hear what their most experienced members already suspect.