Pre-Mortem Analysis

A post-mortem explains why a project failed, but by then it is too late to help. A pre-mortem does the opposite: before a project starts, the team imagines that it has already failed and asks why. The psychologist Gary Klein described this method in the Harvard Business Review in 2007. It builds on research showing that when people imagine an event as if it has already happened, they find more reasons for it. A pre-mortem takes less than an hour and follows five simple steps.

1. Brief the Plan

The first step is to make sure that everyone knows the plan well. The leader explains the goal, the timeline, the budget and the main tasks. The group should include people who see the work from different angles. Nobody can imagine how a plan could fail without understanding it first.

Example: A family plans a two-week holiday abroad. The parents brief the plan to everyone: the flights, the hotels and the budget. Now even the teenagers know what is planned.

At work: Hind, a marketing manager, will launch a new mobile app in three months. She briefs the plan to her team: the launch date, the budget and the advertising campaign. Everyone now sees the same picture.

2. Imagine the Failure

Next, the leader asks the group to imagine that it is the future and the project has failed badly. The failure is presented as a fact, not as a possibility. This small change gives people permission to voice doubts without seeming disloyal. It also moves the mind from defending the plan to explaining a result.

Example: The parents say: imagine that we are back home and the holiday was a disaster. Suddenly, everyone has ideas instead of just excitement.

At work: Hind asks the team to imagine the failure: it is six months from now, and the app launch was a fiasco. The room becomes quiet, and people start to think hard.

3. Write the Reasons

Then each person writes down, alone and in silence, every reason they can think of for the failure. A few minutes are enough. Writing alone matters, because in an open discussion people tend to follow the loudest or most senior voice. Small worries that seem too minor to mention also belong on the list.

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Example: Each family member writes the reasons alone: lost passports, a hotel far from the city, or money running out in the first week.

At work: Hind's team writes the reasons alone for three minutes. A developer writes that the app was not tested on older phones, and a designer writes that the advertising started too late.

4. Share One at a Time

Now the leader asks each person in turn to read out one reason from the list. The rounds continue until all reasons are shared, and someone records them where everyone can see them. Nobody argues or defends the plan at this point, because the aim is to collect, not to judge. It helps when the leader goes first, because this shows that doubts are welcome.

Example: The family shares one reason at a time around the dinner table. The youngest child adds a point that nobody had thought of: one passport runs out next month.

At work: Hind reads the first reason herself, and then each person shares one at a time. After four rounds, the board shows twenty possible causes of failure.

5. Strengthen the Plan

Finally, the team looks at the list and picks the risks that are most serious and most likely. For each one, it agrees on an action that prevents the problem or reduces the damage. The list is kept and reviewed during the project, because new risks can appear. A pre-mortem does not kill a plan; it makes the plan stronger.

Example: The family strengthens the plan: they renew the passport, change one hotel and keep some money in reserve. The holiday goes smoothly.

At work: Hind's team strengthens the plan: the app will be tested on older phones, and the advertising will start a month earlier. The app launches on time, and the team reviews the list every two weeks.

Conclusion

In summary, a pre-mortem has five steps: brief the plan, imagine the failure, write the reasons, share them one at a time, and strengthen the plan. It turns hindsight into foresight, before any time or money is lost. It also makes it safe for quiet team members to raise their doubts. A short meeting about failure can be the best way to plan for success.

Sources

- Klein, G. (2007). Performing a Project Premortem. Harvard Business Review – https://hbr.org/2007/09/performing-a-project-premortem
- Gary Klein: The Premortem – https://www.gary-klein.com/premortem
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