

THE BUILDER'S PSYCHOLOGY LAB · TOOL

Executive Premortem Toolkit

Surface what will sink a decision before you commit to it.

A premortem surfaces the concerns that ordinary planning suppresses. Use it before any major commitment. Assume the decision has already failed, and have the team explain why. Print this toolkit and run it with your team.

The premortem, in five moves

1 State the decision
Name the plan clearly, so everyone reacts to the same thing.

2 Assume it failed
Move to a year from now: the initiative failed badly.

3 Explain why, independently
Each person writes the causes before any discussion.

4 Cluster preventable causes
Group the failures; separate bad luck from bad conditions.

5 Assign owners and warning signals
Give each preventable cause an owner and an early indicator.

PAGE 1

Why conduct a premortem?

Ordinary planning asks what could go wrong and gets guarded answers. A premortem assumes the decision has already failed and asks the team to explain why. This move, which researchers call prospective hindsight, raises the number and specificity of the concerns people surface, because it is safer to explain a failure that has notionally already happened than to predict one and risk looking like a naysayer. It converts private doubt into shared, actionable information before the commitment is made rather than after it fails.

PAGE 2

Facilitation instructions

- 1 State the decision or plan clearly, so everyone is reacting to the same thing.
- 2 Ask the group to assume it is a year from now and the initiative has failed badly.
- 3 Give participants silent writing time to list why it failed, individually.
- 4 Collect the explanations independently, before any discussion, so no one anchors on the first voice.
- 5 Cluster the failure causes into themes.
- 6 Identify which causes are preventable conditions rather than bad luck.
- 7 Assign owners and decision rights for the preventable ones.

- 8 Define the early warning indicators that would tell you a cause is materializing.

PAGE 3

Individual worksheet

It is twelve months from now. The initiative failed badly. What happened?

What did leaders fail to notice?

What assumption proved false?

What concern remained unspoken?

Which dependency was treated as certain?

Where did authority sit too far from the knowledge?

What signal appeared early but was ignored?

What prevented the organization from changing course?

PAGE 4

The Four A's risk scan

ATTENTION

What is competing for the attention this needs to succeed?

ALIGNMENT

Where do participants hold different definitions of success?

AUTHORITY

Who can approve, stop, redirect, or escalate the work?

ADAPTABILITY

What evidence would cause us to revise the plan?

PAGE 5

Decision hygiene record

Decision

Date

Decision owner

Key assumptions

Reference class (how similar efforts have actually turned out)

Known uncertainties

Stop criteria

Escalation threshold

Review date

PAGE 6

Debrief connection

A premortem is only half the loop. After the work is done, compare what you feared to what happened, and feed the difference into your next planning cycle.

What actually happened?

Which assumption proved correct?

Which assumption proved wrong?

What did we notice too late?

What should change before the next planning cycle?

Which of the Four A's is most likely to sink your next initiative? Take the free Executive Diagnostic at missionintelsystems.com/assessments