
PreMortems – Hype or Innovation?

Jeff Oltmann

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Gary Klein suggests an interesting approach to identifying risks at the beginning of a project. He calls it a *premortem*, riffing on the postmortem that engineering teams usually run at the end of a project. Klein explains,

A postmortem in a medical setting allows health professionals and the family to learn what caused a patient's death. Everyone benefits except, of course, the patient. A premortem in a business setting comes at the beginning of a project rather than the end, so that the project can be improved rather than autopsied.¹

PMI Fellow Max Wideman argues that the premortem is hype - a fancy name for risk analysis.

Call it "premortem" if you wish, but a project risk assessment should be conducted at a high level and at the very earliest phase of a potential project, indeed to determine the level of risk when preparing the project's business case.²

True, but I think Klein has a useful insight here. He asks premortem participants to imagine that the project has already failed, and then work backwards to come up with reasons for that failure. Klein cites research by Mitchell, Russo, and Pennington on the mental technique of prospective hindsight, which "found that prospective hindsight—imagining that an event has already occurred—increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%."

This subtle mental shift apparently helps premortem participants be more prolific at finding possible causes of failure before they happen. Klein gives this example:

A typical premortem begins after the team has been briefed on the plan. The leader starts the exercise by informing everyone that the project has failed spectacularly. Over the next few minutes those in the room independently write down every reason they can think of for the failure—especially the kinds of things they ordinarily wouldn't mention as potential problems, for fear of being impolitic. For example, in a session held at one *Fortune* 50-size company, an executive suggested that a billion-dollar environmental sustainability project had "failed" because interest waned when the CEO retired.

Klein says that "[the premortem] reduces the kind of damn-the-torpedoes attitude often assumed by people who are overinvested in a project," but he does not offer any data contrasting its effectiveness with more traditional risk identification methods.

I firmly believe, like Max Wideman, that hashing out risks and acting on them early is critical to making complex projects successful. That crucial risk discussion allows you to prevent some problems and to build the flexibility to react swiftly to others when they do occur. Whether you do it in the traditional way, or using a premortem, just do it!

¹ Klein, Gary, *Forethought Grist* section, Harvard Business Review, September 2007

² Wideman, Max, "Old Wine in New Bottles?" http://www.maxwideman.com/musings/old_wine.htm