The Power of Pre Mortems

In a medical setting, a post mortem has a rather grisly context—an examination to determine a person's cause of death and other contributing medical factors.

But post mortems also exist within businesses and organizations of all sorts. Post mortems are reviews of product or service launches, projects, campaigns and other activities after they have either been in place for a certain period of time, completed or discontinued. The objective is simple: Determine what went right, what went wrong and what adjustments, if any, you should make moving forward.

Those are valuable issues, but consider: What competitive advantage could you secure if you had a system by which you could identify common post mortem problems before they had a chance to occur?

Welcome to the anticipatory world of Pre Mortems.

Pre Mortems—Anticipatory Problem Solving

As the name might suggest, Pre Mortems are very similar to post mortems in that they involve careful analysis. But, unlike a post mortem, which is the review of something after it has been done, a Pre Mortem is used before a new product, service or change is implemented, identifying predictable problems and all barriers to success, and, from there, pre-solving them ahead of time.

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A Pre Mortem can involve little more than some straightforward questions. For instance, before debuting a new product, service, strategy or imperative, what problems can you expect in implementation and execution? What objections or criticism will you encounter? That way, it's possible—in the case of predictable problems, to use one example—to pre-solve them before they have the chance to actually take place. A similar opportunity exists with the upside: If you can anticipate that one aspect or element of a project or product is going to go particularly well, what steps can you take in advance to make sure that it happens and leverage that success even further?

Looked at another way, Pre Mortems are an example of my Anticipatory Organization Model's use of opposites—more specifically, what I refer to as The Law of Opposites. The thinking behind this principle is simple but exceedingly effective. If everyone is looking or going in a certain direction, what insights and advantages may be uncovered by looking in the opposite direction? That's the opposite approach that Pre Mortems afford—while competitors are routinely employing post mortems, your organization can anticipate and pre-solve many problems and challenges before they have a chance to morph into major headaches.

We did that very thing when we were developing our Anticipatory Organization Learning System. We recruited a number of CEOs and other leaders from a broad array of industries to pre-test the program. We made certain to solicit their feedback regarding what problems they foresaw in implementing the system in their organizations, what they liked, what they didn't like, what was confusing and other valuable information. We then pre-solved those predictable problems and made adjustments prior to launch. It worked like a charm and we received a Top Ten Product of the Year Award and have exceeded

customer expectations ever since thanks to our Pre Mortem!

The Best of Both Worlds

This isn't to suggest that post mortems are not important. Not at all. Another principle of the AO Model is the Both/And Principle. Instead of thinking you have to do either a post mortem or a Pre Mortem, you should do both! After all, a review of a product or service once it's in use is exceedingly valuable—in fact, it's another aspect of elevated, comprehensive planning. Once you investigate how something is actually performing, you have the opportunity to make any necessary adjustments to help it function even better.

A Pre Mortem takes that same approach, but in this case solving predictable problems before they can happen. To further elevate your planning, take the time to anticipate problems, drawbacks and other aspects of any project, product or service before it is implemented. That's a form of anticipatory planning that offers one of the most powerful benefits of anticipatory thinking—the opportunity to pre-solve problems before they actually become problems.

About the Author:

DANIEL BURRUS is considered one of the world's leading technology forecasters and innovation experts, and is the founder and CEO of Burrus Research, a research and consulting firm that monitors global advancements in technology driven trends to help clients understand how technological, social and business forces are converging to create enormous untapped opportunities. He is the author of six books including The New York Times best seller Flash Foresight.   This article is reprinted with permission. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited. For reprint permission, contact Burrus Research, Inc. at office@burrus.com.