

Premortems: Reflections of the Future, Not the Past

Most everyone is familiar with postmortems, at least in a medical sense. With regard to medicine, a postmortem is conducted to determine why a person has died. Postmortems can be valuable in all sorts of ways, including research into disease and medications, and other important scientific goals. The problem is there's just one person who doesn't stand to benefit from a postmortem: The person lying on the table.

In many ways, that is similar to what happens when an organization has a postmortem after a big meeting or a new product or service launch. The trouble is, by then, the "patient" may already be beyond help. In short, hindsight is not nearly as valuable as Futureview.

You've probably never done this before but give some thought to the value of a premortem and how it can be useful in identifying and pre-solving problems before they have a chance to do any real damage.

Premortem Basics

The goal of a postmortem is simple: Let's identify what went right, what went wrong and what adjustments, if any, we should make moving forward.

That's valuable information that shouldn't wait until a product fails, a budget is exceeded or any other mishaps. Instead, try flipping that concept around to a premortem.

Unlike a postmortem, a premortem is more of a proactive preview—a type of anticipatory thinking and analysis that looks to identify predictable problems, drawbacks and other elements of a product or service beforehand.

Proof of Premortems' Effectiveness

Research has shown that premortems can be exceedingly effective in anticipating problems before they occur. Studies by Deborah J. Mitchell of the Wharton School, Jay Russo of Cornell and Nancy Pennington of the University of Colorado found that "prospective hindsight"—imagining that an event has already occurred—boosts our ability to correctly identify the reasons for future outcomes by 30 percent.

Taking that research a step further, not only does a premortem help us pinpoint varied reasons for why things may or may not go as well, it also positions an individual and organization to take corrective action before a problem actually takes place.

Think about the advantage of presolving problems, in effect, before they actually become problems.

How to Conduct a Premortem

A premortem doesn't have to be unduly complicated. Consider these questions:

- Before introducing a new product, service, strategy or imperative, what problems can we expect in implementation and execution?
- Are those problems within our organization or outside it?
- Is there anything we can do to address them before they occur?
- By the same token, if we can anticipate that one aspect or element of a project or product is going to go particularly well, what steps can we take in advance to further leverage that success?

This doesn't mean you should ignore the value of postmortems. Not at all. A review of a product or service that's in use is exceedingly valuable. Once you investigate how something is actually performing, you have the opportunity to make any necessary adjustments to help it function even better.

A premortem takes that same approach, only proactively. It's a form of elevated planning—taking time to anticipate possible problems, drawbacks and other aspects of any project, product or service before they're in play.

And that offers one of the most powerful benefits of anticipatory thinking—the opportunity to presolve problems before they're genuine problems that require attention.



About the Author:

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