

# The Pre-Mortem

From: Gary Klein, *The Power of Intuition*, 2003, p. 98–101

## Step 0: Know the Plan

Your team needs to be familiar with this plan before attempting to do a Pre-Mortem.

## Step 1: Preparation

Get everyone together and comfortable. Plan for this exercise to take about an hour. Each person should have a few sheets of paper.

## Step 2: Imagine a Fiasco

Start by claiming to look into a crystal ball to see the outcome of your plan. Uh-oh, it's a failure! Not just any failure, but a complete, total, *embarrassing* disaster.



It is so bad, no one is talking to each other! The team members aren't talking to each other, and our stakeholders outside the NWS aren't talking to us any more. Things have gone as wrong as they can go!

But... you cannot see *why*. Your crystal ball isn't expensive enough to reveal the reason(s) for the failure. The question of the hour is "What could have caused this?"



## Step 3: Generate Reasons for Failure

Each person then takes three minutes to write down all the reasons they think the failure occurred. Here is where the differing intuitions of the team members come out. Each has a unique set of experiences, scars, and mental models they bring. The collective knowledge in the room is far

greater than that of any one person. Klein has found that this activity helps the group share experiences and calibrate their understanding of the difficulties.

## Step 4: Consolidate the Lists

Each person shares one item on their list. A facilitator records them on a whiteboard. After each person has shared one item, continue to go around the room, sharing one item each time, until everyone has exhausted their lists. By the end of this step, the list should include everyone's concerns.

## Step 5: Revisit the Plan

Address the two or three items of greatest concern, then schedule another meeting to generate ideas for avoiding or minimizing the other problems.

## Step 6: Periodically Review the List!

Take the list out every 3–4 months to re-sensitize your team to problems that may be emerging.

Some people find Pre-Mortems to be depressing. Klein finds they help **prevent overconfidence!**



Pre-Mortems encourage people to **voice their concerns**. Morale can go *up*.

Pre-Mortems help teams **worry about the right things**.



Decision-makers use Pre-Mortems to:

- **Improve plans,**
- Identify where **additional resources** are necessary, and
- **Start** problematic tasks earlier.

A Pre-Mortem *doesn't serve as a replacement* for your intuitions!

### ***More of what Klein has to say about Pre-Mortems:***

**How is this different** than just brainstorming how a plan can go wrong? Most of us do worry about things that can go wrong, but when we do, Klein points out that we unconsciously restrict our thinking because we assume our plan *will* work. By starting instead with the assumption that our plan will *fail*—and fail *miserably*—we open our thinking to identifying flaws we would otherwise ignore.

**Is this the same as** a "risk analysis".... "red team" .... "murder board" .... "problem analysis"?

No. Although the general idea is similar, the strategy is different. Klein claims it is more effective. Red teams are outsiders and eat up resources. They don't usually have repeated meetings because they are expensive. Problem analysis is generally good, but often carried out with the subtle message that no showstoppers are identified. Leaders don't want that, and neither do the team members who created the plan.