



March 2010

[Decision Leader Review](#)

[Pre-Mortem](#)

[News](#)

[Quote of the Month](#)

What is the Decision Leader Review?

This monthly publication brings you current research and information in the area of business decision making. You'll find new concepts and ideas you can put to use immediately to improve the quality and speed of your strategic and tactical decision making activities.

Word count: 844 - Time to Read: 3 min.

Pre-Mortem

Last month we highlighted several areas in plans and projects that are prone to problems, breakdowns and failures. This month we discuss the *Pre-Mortem*, a risk mitigation planning tool with a twist.

A plan can be defined as a series of steps to reach an objective. It's also the implementation of a prior decision. It's no secret that plans fail much more often than we are willing to admit. The reasons are numerous:

- Attitude that assumes that few problems will arise
- Inability to quickly "triage" problems that cause delays
- Rapid change happening within the organization during plan execution
- Major technical or logistical hurdles
- Decisions based on flawed logic
- Failure to learn from previous failures (and successes)

...and many more.

One additional reason that's widely acknowledged (but rarely discussed) is that people can be reluctant to speak up about potential problems and risks in plans. Silence about what can go wrong often leads a team to underestimate the killer problems that, if left unattended, will bring a project to its knees.

That's why many organizations use formal Risk Mitigation Analysis (RMA) as a regular part of their planning and implementation process. RMA is typically done early in the planning process to reveal gaps and vulnerabilities in the plan. The goal is to identify additional steps needed and build them in, to create a more sturdy and robust plan.

However, we know that even with prudent risk mitigation planning, many "killer" potential problems and risks remain hidden from view. Why? In our experience, two factors contribute to this gap. First, many of us treat risk mitigation planning as a kind of hypothetical exercise - where we ask what *might* go wrong, *what* might be the cause, what *might* we do to prevent the problem from happening, and what *might* we do if the problem really does occur? There are so many "mights" in the equation, we lose interest in the exercise.

One way to combat this is to shake up habitual thinking patterns by changing the assumptions embedded in the discussion. This is where the Pre-Mortem process comes in.

In a Pre-Mortem session, we look into the future and **assume** the worst has happened; the project has failed, and failed in colossal terms. We then ask what went wrong to produce such a giant collapse. This is the process of conducting prospective hindsight - imagining that an event has already occurred. Doing this can greatly increase the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes.

Next, team members record reasons for the failure individually. We encourage each person to generate at least 10 ideas / causes. We also encourage them to get creative - to list the head slapping "I never thought about that" things that could bring the project down. Once this is done, the leader then asks each person to contribute one or two ideas from their list, until all ideas are out. After discussing the aggregate list, the team switches into problem solving mode to identify ways to strengthen the plan.

The Pre-Mortem is more than a standard risk analysis. Because of its prospective hindsight approach, it already assumes failure and works backward. Instead of asking "What might go wrong?" it asks "What did go wrong?" The change in perspective is huge.

Timing of the Pre-Mortem is important. Here is the sequence that we recommend:

- Complete the initial planning, the plan structure, steps and tasks.
- Apply the Decision Focus tool of Risk Mitigation Analysis to reveal gaps and vulnerabilities. Objective: identify additional steps needed to strengthen the plan, and build them into the plan structure.
- Shortly before the launch of the execution phase, conduct the Pre-Mortem. This can be done for the plan as a whole, or prior to start of key phases of the plan. Objective: find and diffuse the hidden "bombs" that will cause mass destruction and jeopardize the success of the plan.

•
One more thing: It's crucial that the person facilitating the Pre-Mortem discussion keeps the tone free from bias, prejudice, or the feeling that there is any kind of hidden agenda. If this is a potential concern, choose a neutral person or objective third party to lead the meeting.

The Pre-Mortem has an additional benefit. When the project post-mortem is conducted, improvements made through the Pre-Mortem process can be evaluated and their positive effects quantified. This reinforces a culture of proactive planning in the organization.

The Idea in Practice

What one "plan" do you feel most nervous about? That's your first Pre-Mortem session candidate. We'll help. Send an email to info@focustools.com and we'll send you a Pre-Mortem template you can use in your Pre-Mortem team meeting. Just put "Pre-Mortem Template" in the subject line.

News

Focus Performance Systems Receives National Award



Focus Performance Systems (FPS), has been honored as a 2009 Ruby Award Winner from Inscape Publishing, the world's leading provider of DiSC® solutions. Click for full press release: [RUBY Press Release \(pdf\)](#)

Quote of the Month

"Real wisdom is to know the extent of one's ignorance."

- Confucius
