The Pre-Mortem:
A Simple Technique To Save Any Project From Failure

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An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Any doctor will tell you that.
And so will any sick patient.

So, why is it that age-old wisdom like this is rarely practiced?
- Few people exercise and eat right before they realize their health is failing.
- You rarely see anyone keep up their car before it breaks down.
- No one replaces their roof until water's dripping on their head.

What's baffling about these problems is they rarely come out of the blue. They aren't surprises; we see them coming.
- You can feel yourself slowly getting out of shape.
- You know if you never change your oil, your car is going to die.
- Every day you come home and, for a split second, notice the sagging in the roof before moving on to more pressing matters.

The same is true for any risk-taker working on a big project with many moving pieces. As you maneuver through each day, it takes everything you've got to get through the massive pile of to-dos.

You see certain things building up—things you know are going to cause big problems down the line, but they're not urgent yet. More pressing matters get your attention.
And you know if you allow them to go wrong, they could sink the project. They're big risks, and they're right in plain sight!
As a smart introverted leader, you know damn well something must be done, but you feel too scattered to do *anything*.
Luckily, there's one simple thing you can do to save *any* project from disaster.

The Pre-Mortem Technique: Bringing Order to Chaos in A Big Project

Too often, we look back on projects gone horribly wrong and ask ourselves, "What happened?"
We do a *post*-mortem and try to put together the broken pieces that will explain how we failed.
But *after* your project has failed is the wrong time to discuss the big problems it faced!
What you should've done, instead, is held a *pre*-mortem to look ahead at the challenges that could cause everything to fail, and created a plan to navigate around them.

As part of the small Action Team responsible for putting on a summit for 3,000 people here in Portland each summer, The Pre-Mortem Technique is one we adopted from year one and have held as a sacred ritual—one we know will shepherd our fragile event through any challenges that face it.

Several weeks before the show, we all get together with pizza and ice cream to geek out over the doom and gloom that could come our way. Sounds depressing, but putting big problems out in the open is actually quite a relief.

When you're working on a high stakes project, no elephant should be left in the room!
Regardless of the goal you're working on, there are three steps you can take to complete your own pre-mortem and put an iron-clad fence around success for your project.

How to Perform a Pre-Mortem in Three Steps

This is a relatively simple process and powerful in its ability to prevent crisis when done correctly. It's important, though, that you complete every step and that you do them in the right order, following the instructions carefully.
Before the process, though, a few rules:

- **Set aside at least two hours of uninterrupted time**. If that seems like a lot, ask yourself how much time it will take to clean up the mess you make if disaster strikes while your pants are down.
- **All stakeholders should be present**. Invite *everyone* with a significant role to the pre-mortem. If you don't, you'll face a number of blind spots that could still blow up in your face… and you won't even know they're there because the person who could have alerted to you to them wasn't invited. Everyone is equally important at the pre-mortem.
- **The pre-mortem must be a face to face meeting**. This process will not work via email. A live chat could work, but it will be cumbersome. Video chats would be the next best solution. But unless it is physically impossible, get everyone together in one room. This is critical.
- **One person should do nothing but take notes**. Lots of important problems and solutions get tossed around during a pre-mortem. They'll be useless to you if someone isn't in charge of making sure they're remembered.

Now, the process…

Step 1: Spend one hour listing every possible problem you can imagine.
Your one and only job during the first hour of your pre-mortem is to get down—on paper or a whiteboard—every single problem that has even a remote chance of occurring that would derail your project.

Dream big! Dream small!

At this stage, no problem is off-limits, and everyone at the meeting should feel completely uninhibited about tossing out things that sound ridiculous.
Your ability to do this well will depend on how great a job you've done building trust within your team. Or, if you're flying solo, you'll need to be open and honest with *yourself*.
Think of this as a brainstorming session of doom. All ideas go, and you should encourage your team to explore different variations of the same problem…

- What if a monster eats a team member?
- What if an elephant eats our guest of honor?
- What if a monster and an elephant get in a fight in our venue?
…as well as very different, unrelated problems:
- What if no one shows up to our event?
- What if our website goes down?
- What if the most important person backs out on us?

The goal is to create a completely exhaustive list of things that could go wrong. Any route you take to get there is allowed.

The only thing *not* allowed during this phase is proposed solutions. These are strictly forbidden because they draw the team away from getting every single problem out in the open.
If you have a team of talented and solution oriented people, you'll find this is harder to manage than you think.

Step 2: Pick the top 10 problems.

At this point, you have a massive list of problems staring you in the face, and you need a method to make some sense of the madness.

Now is the time to pick the top 10 problems to focus on before moving into the next phase of the pre-mortem: finding solutions.
Here are a few rules you'll want to follow to make sure you pick the best ones:

- **Focus on show-stoppers**. The problems you focus on solving should be critical to your project. In other words, if it occurs, will it severely impact the project? If the answer is no, cross it off; it doesn't belong on your pre-mortem list. This rule will eliminate many of the minor issues that came up—and helped you find bigger problems—but aren't really mission critical.
- **Pick problems likely to happen**. Don't waste time solving problems that aren't likely to actually happen. Instead, try to home in on the "elephant in the room" problems that came up—the ones everyone was secretly worried about but never brought up until now.
- **Discard problems you have no control over**. Every project will face some external risks that you simply can't control. Toss those out now because there's nothing you can do about them. This eliminates problems like "Tornado blows everyone to Canada." From here on out, you're focusing on problems you can actually fix.

Step 3: Spend one hour creating solutions.

Now is the time for your team to do what it does best: solve problems.

Believe it or not, this part is actually the easiest. Once the biggest problems are out in the open, their solutions become surprisingly simple. As Einstein used to say, "If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and only five minutes finding the solution."

Go through each problem in your top ten list and either:
- Create a proactive solution for it (best for problems facing you now), or
- Define a backup plan (best for problems that *could* happen, but haven't yet).
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Most importantly, a solution is not complete until action items are created and assigned to team members to complete.

Never forget: this process is useless if you get all the way to creating a solution but don't carry it out because no one knew they were in charge.
Your Homework Today

There are no guarantees when you're taking on a big, risky project. Sometimes things will go wrong that you didn't—or even couldn't—anticipate. But taking a few hours to go through the pre-mortem process is a wise investment for any project that's important to you.
Once you've done it, you can go to bed each night knowing all your bases are covered. Don't underestimate the value of peace of mind.

Take five minutes and schedule a pre-mortem for whatever it is you're working on now.
If you're working with others, be sure to invite them.