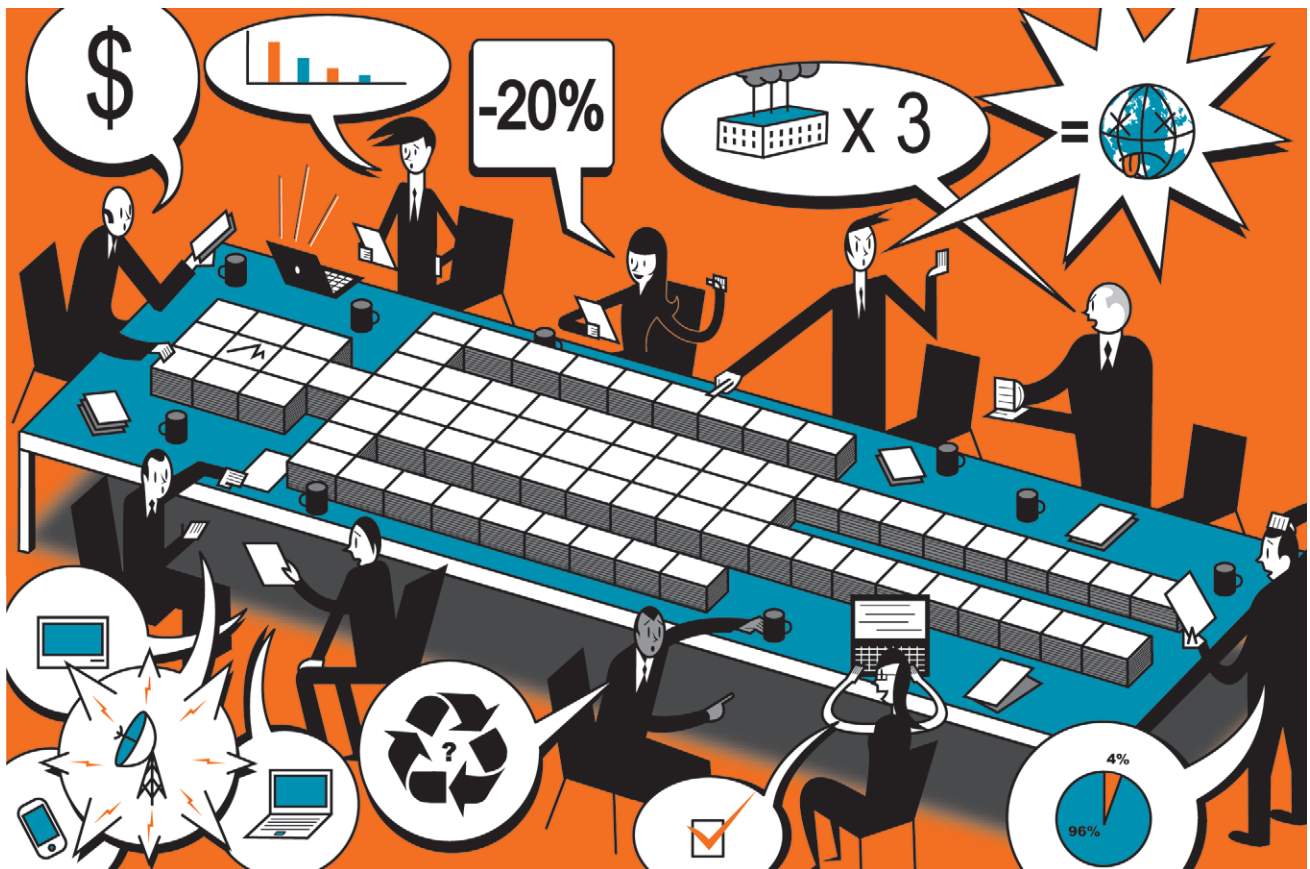


forethought

A survey of ideas, trends, people, and practices on the business horizon



GRIST

Performing a Project *Premortem* by Gary Klein

Projects fail at a spectacular rate. One reason is that too many people are reluctant to speak up about their reservations during the all-important planning phase. By making it safe for dissenters who are knowledgeable about the undertaking and worried about its weaknesses to speak up, you can improve a project's chances of success.

Research conducted in 1989 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 – increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%. We have used prospective hindsight to devise a method called a *premortem*, which helps project teams identify risks at the outset.

A *premortem* is the hypothetical opposite of a *postmortem*. A *postmortem* in a medical setting allows health

professionals and the family to learn what caused a patient's death. Everyone benefits except, of course, the patient.

A *premortem* in a business setting comes at the beginning of a project rather than the end, so that the project can be improved rather than autopsied. Unlike a typical critiquing session, in which project team members are asked what *might* go wrong, the *premortem* operates on the assumption that the "patient" has died, and so asks what *did* go wrong. The team

Joel Castillo

members' task is to generate plausible reasons for the project's failure.

A typical premortem begins after the team has been briefed on the plan. The leader starts the exercise by informing everyone that the project has failed spectacularly. Over the next few minutes those in the room independently write down every reason they can think of for the failure – especially the kinds of things they ordinarily wouldn't mention as potential problems, for fear of being impolitic. For example, in a session held at one *Fortune* 50–size company, an executive suggested that a billion-dollar environmental sustainability project had “failed” because interest waned when the CEO retired. Another pinned the failure on a dilution of the business case after a government agency revised its policies.

Next the leader asks each team member, starting with the project manager, to read one reason from his or her list; everyone states a different reason until all have been recorded. After the session is over, the project manager reviews the list, looking for ways to strengthen the plan.

In a session regarding a project to make state-of-the-art computer algorithms available to military air-campaign planners, a team member who had been silent during the previous lengthy kickoff meeting volunteered that one of the algorithms wouldn't easily fit on certain laptop computers being used in the field. Accordingly, the software would take hours to run when users needed quick results. Unless the team could find a workaround, he argued, the project was impractical. It turned out that the algorithm developers had already created a powerful shortcut, which they had been reluctant to mention. Their shortcut was substituted, and the project went on to be highly successful.

In a session assessing a research project in a different organization, a senior

executive suggested that the project's “failure” occurred because there had been insufficient time to prepare a business case prior to an upcoming corporate review of product initiatives. During the entire 90-minute kickoff meeting, no one had even mentioned any time constraints. The project manager quickly revised the plan to take the corporate decision cycle into account.

Although many project teams engage in prelaunch risk analysis, the premortem's prospective hindsight approach offers benefits that other methods don't. Indeed, the premortem doesn't just help teams to identify potential problems early on. It also reduces the kind of damn-the-torpedoes attitude often assumed by people who are overinvested

in a project. Moreover, in describing weaknesses that no one else has mentioned, team members feel valued for their intelligence and experience, and others learn from them. The exercise also sensitizes the team to pick up early signs of trouble once the project gets under way. In the end, a premortem may be the best way to circumvent any need for a painful postmortem.

Gary Klein (gary@decisionmaking.com) is the chief scientist of Klein Associates, a division of Applied Research Associates, in Fairborn, Ohio. He is the author of *Sources of Power: How People Make Decisions* (MIT Press, 1998) and *The Power of Intuition* (Doubleday, 2004).

Reprint F0709A

EMPLOYEE MORALE

How to Teach Pride in “Dirty Work”

Managers in occupations that the public considers repellent can use an array of techniques to help their employees cope with and, indeed, feel proud of their work, according to a study that drew on interviews with 54 managers in 18 stigmatized occupations, including exterminator, “exotic” entertainer, and prison guard.

Perhaps the most potent method is to develop an occupational ideology that confers a more positive image on the work by reframing it, according to Blake E. Ashforth, of Arizona State University, and three coauthors in the February 2007 *Academy of Management Journal*. A manager at a pest-control company, for instance, might emphasize the value of the knowledge that exterminators acquire. Managers can also help employees establish social buffers, in the form of professional associations

or informal groups of coworkers and friends or family members who understand the work. As one manager of morticians said in an interview that was part of the study, “You go to...a national convention and you find out everybody's in the same boat.”

A third tactic is to provide training on how and when to confront clients and the public to challenge their perceptions of the job. A fourth is to teach how and when to use defensive tactics, such as avoiding specifics during conversations with outsiders. The manager of an abortion clinic, for example, might advise staff members to say that they work “in women's health care.”

The study also found that the organization as a whole can do things to protect employees, such as training them to deal with antagonistic members of the public; providing tours (if appropriate)

Harvard Business Review Notice of Use Restrictions, May 2009

Harvard Business Review and Harvard Business Publishing Newsletter content on EBSCOhost is licensed for the private individual use of authorized EBSCOhost users. It is not intended for use as assigned course material in academic institutions nor as corporate learning or training materials in businesses. Academic licensees may not use this content in electronic reserves, electronic course packs, persistent linking from syllabi or by any other means of incorporating the content into course resources. Business licensees may not host this content on learning management systems or use persistent linking or other means to incorporate the content into learning management systems. Harvard Business Publishing will be pleased to grant permission to make this content available through such means. For rates and permission, contact permissions@harvardbusiness.org.