

## Leadership – Premortem

The best way to recover from a false start is to avoid one in the first place. And the best technique for doing that is something called a premortem<sup>1</sup>.

You have probably heard of a post-mortem when coroners and physicians examine a dead body to determine the cause of death. A premortem, the brainchild of psychologist Gary Klein, applies the same principle but shifts the exam from after to before.

Suppose you and your team are about to embark on a project. Before the project begins, convene for a premortem.

### **"Assume its 18 months from now and our project is a complete disaster. What went wrong?"**

Use the benefits from the power of prospective hindsight to offer some answers. By imagining failure in advance, by thinking through what might cause a false start, you can anticipate some of the potential problems and avoid them once the actual project begins.

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.

- Describe the result of the disaster, making it as realistic as possible.
- Now ask the team to write down independently every reason they can think of for the failure, especially the kinds of things they wouldn't ordinarily mention as being potential problems.
- Once people have stopped writing, ask each team member, including yourself, to share one reason from his or her list. Keep going around the team, with everyone stating a different reason until all have been recorded.
- Once the session is over, the team leader or project manager will review the list, looking for ways to mitigate and strengthen the plan.

<sup>1</sup> Klein, G., 2007. Performing a project premortem. Harvard Business Review, 85(9).