



# Could a Pre-Mortem save your innovation from failure?

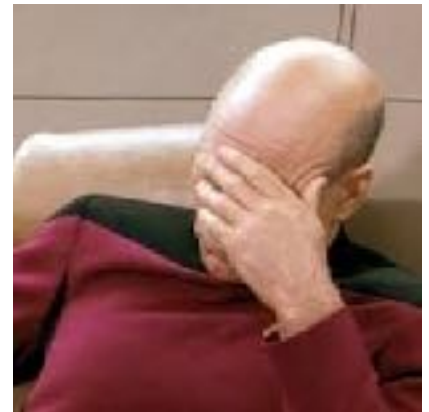
*Learning the lessons of hindsight - beforehand*

## Doh! Why didn't I think of that before?

Innovation is risky at the best of times. But there are many reasons why innovations fail - the more obvious financial, commercial, scientific or technical ones you may feel you've got covered - but what about the social, ethical or environmental issues which may derail your cherished plans?

It's easy to see what went wrong with hindsight. In the *Post-mortem* of a disaster the missteps seem obvious and often entirely preventable. 'How could we have missed it? If only.....'

*Pre-Mortems* are a way of trying to learn the lessons of hindsight - beforehand.



## What is a Pre-mortem?

A Pre-mortem is a way of exploring the potential risks and downsides of a project, a technology, a product, or almost any decision, by envisioning it has failed and working back from the failure to explore what might have led to it. It's an alternative to the 'let's think what could go wrong' approach, which works forward from the present, which we and others have found is often not as effective as hoped in imagining tangible risks.

Pre-mortems tap into the human brain's preference for the concrete rather than the abstract and by making the outcome, eg failure, a certainty, tries to by-pass the difficulties we have in generating explanations for uncertain outcomes rather than sure ones - in particular the not-so-obvious or controversial possibilities.

It works well to understand what might go right also - building back from a runaway success to explore the detail of what might have contributed to a positive outcome is also very useful.

## Why is it a good idea?

We've run a number of 'let's think what could go wrong' approaches in the past and like Pre-Mortems better as a methodology for these reasons:

### **1** *It puts the focus on specifics*

Many of us have been to meetings where the risks of a certain technology or product are debated. Often the concerns discussed and risks envisaged are so generic, abstract or theoretical that it's hard to get to grips with them or see a clear pathway of relevance to the area under discussion. Pre-mortems focus attention at a level of detail that avoids spending too much time in the stratosphere.

## **2      *It legitimises dissent***

Voicing concerns about someone's cherished project is hard; doing it in detail, in front of them, harder still. Many of us are nervous of saying negative things in front of others and keep our real or more controversial fears to ourselves. Sometimes the project leader is so dominant and certain of their success, there is little room for dissent constructive debate, or there is a niggler someone always wanted to bring up but there wasn't the opportunity. This methodology facilitates a much more open and less stressful approach to searching for faults in the plan.

*"In general, organizations really don't like pessimists" and when naysayers raise risks and drawbacks, they are viewed as "almost disloyal."*

*Daniel Kahneman, co-author Thinking Fast and Slow*

## **3      *It generates a positive discussion about threats***

Other methods often pit the owners of the project with those trying to pick holes in it; forcing the owners to try to defend their idea which can result in confrontation and defensiveness. Other methodologies can lead to rows about the plausibility of risks or the legitimacy of the views expressed. By taking the project owners out of the context of defending their ideas, this approach generates a much more positive discussion about risks, threats and uncertainties.

## **4      *It involves stakeholders in constructive debate***

The involvement of stakeholders is increasingly an important component of risk assessment and due diligence in responsible innovation. Sectors such as aeronautics and healthcare innovation have been doing this successfully for some time, because they are fully aware of their own bias and the narrowness of their own views.

*"Patients often have the guts, insight, imagination and freedom from institutionally limited thinking to ask 'what if...?' They also widen the array of options for improvement and change".*

*David Gilbert, Patient & Public Involvement expert*

Pre-mortems are a more influential and less confrontational approach which allows for a constructive interaction between stakeholders, improving the quality of debate and potential impact assessment.

## **5      *It improves people's ability to predict reasons for future outcomes***

Although, like many other foresight tools, evidence is limited on the effectiveness of this approach, that which has been done is interesting. Research suggests using Pre-mortems, or the more academic term 'prospective hindsight' can improve people's ability to predict reasons for future outcomes quite significantly, and generate much more specific potential outcomes which are more useful to decision makers. Though there is no research to indicate it makes it more likely that anyone actually learns from the process and acts on the potential problems in advance!

The difference in outcome appears in part due to the methodology helping override our natural optimism. Simply by the act of thinking about risks in advance, as opposed to just ignoring them and hoping they don't happen, we generate more useful information. But also, more intriguingly, the focus on the single event (the failure) in place of the exercise of having to imagine multiple reasons something could go wrong, makes the potential outcome seem more concrete. Evidence from the behavioural sciences indicates this may use our brain's natural inclination to motivate people to giving more attention to the specifics and therefore become more effective at prediction.

## **6**     *It's flexible.*

Unlike some methodologies which really only work well over a number of days, a Pre-mortem can be conducted effectively in just a few hours, though we feel a full day is preferable. For example, the morning could focus on the Pre-mortem from the perspective of failure and the afternoon considering it from the perspective of success.

It can also be the focus for an ongoing programme of stakeholder involvement about different aspects of the innovation - eg considering potential environmental, social, ethical, economic or technical risks individually, or specific themes such as empowerment and disempowerment or human rights.

## **7**     *It's much more fun than risk analysis!*

Meetings about risk are rarely that much fun. However, we think this methodology provides a very engaging format which helps break down hierarchies and relationship boundaries, defusing defensiveness and making the whole process more enjoyable and so perhaps more likely that attendees participate wholeheartedly and take on board its findings.

## **If you would like to know more...**

Hilary would be pleased to talk to you about this approach and explore how it might work for you. Call her on 07799 625064 or email [hilary@societyinside.com](mailto:hilary@societyinside.com)

To know more about us and what else we do, see our website [www.societyinside.com](http://www.societyinside.com)

