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

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

Performing a Project Premortem by Gary Klein
Accordingly, the software would take things they ordinarily wouldn’t mention those in the room independently write team has been briefed on the plan. The failure on a dilution of the business for the failure – especially the kinds of 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.

**EMPLOYEE MORALE**

**How to Teach Pride in “Dirty Work”**

Managers in occupations that the public considers repellant 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)

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