**The premortem: Give the patient a fighting chance**

In this article I am going to describe just one idea - the premortem. This is the process of taking a strategy, project or change initiative and putting it through a rigorous forensic process - BEFORE you launch. As the name suggests the premortem is a preventative approach. If your organisations deal in *postmortems*, the patient has died!

Often, organisations do not expose a project or initiative to this type of process at all. They start at point A and design a series of actions to reach point Z. At which stage, they hope, the problem has been solved. This type of approach can be recognised by two features:

• alternative **options** in design or delivery are not properly considered

• the focus is on WHAT to do, with little consideration of **HOW to do it**

At the point you have a fairly firm idea you need a project or a change initiative, call your team together, maybe also involve a few sceptics. Ask these questions.



I have applied this model in dozens of organisations across many sectors and it seems to work pretty much every time - because it is simple. But what it is doing is rather fundamental - it is challenging your core business case.

**Step 1 What is the problem?** I like to use use Plain English! Yes a problem can sometimes be a missed opportunity - but identifying the problem is rarely blindingly obvious, often teams initially describe symptoms before they arrive at the real problem, or they confuse causes with problems.

**Step 2 What causes the problem?** This is often the killer question. Say your business performance is faltering….there can be many causes of that. Which are the main causes, what is your evidence? Concentrate on the causes you can do something about….if exchange rates are causing difficulties, you may not be able to do much about that, so control the controllables.

**Step 3 What options do we have?** I work for a company that has a recurring problem which, on the quiet, staff call AGW (Another Good Wheeze). Someone (usually a Director) has a good idea in the bath, or picks up an idea at a conference and suddenly that becomes the solution. At this stage, you should do the opposite - force yourself to consider alternatives. This is a mindset, “there is a better project out there, I have just got to find it”.

**Step 4 Which is the best option?** Identify 4-8 key tests to apply to each option in turn. Design these tests specifically for each particular initiative or project - impact, financials, riskiness, effect on customers, timescales and so on. One key test is ”what is the pattern of failures in our organisation?” What are the recurring barriers to us delivering change and are we doing enough differently this time to overcome them?

Different cultures can exhibit quite varied characteristics during the development process. In the USA, firms are far more likely to test an idea by doing it. In Japan, the process for making major decisions is called ringiseido, which requires a lengthy process of collaborative reviews by peers and increasingly by senior management levels. The pace of decision-making can be tortuous but once decisions are made, Japanese firms tend to move fast and decisively. Most European business cultures tend to lie somewhere between the prevailing US and Japanese models. My point is that just as cultures can have different types of weaknesses in how they operate, so do individual firms - part of the premortem process is to identify the ‘failing’ factors in your business and take steps to remedy those practices.

I have so far rather implied the premortem is a one-off event. Usually it is not. I have facilitated project teams, where there have been 2, 3 or even 4 workshops, each focused on just 1 or 2 of the questions in the problem/causes model. Premortems are not just about workshops either, you will have to consult and gather data and evidence in between meetings.

We all know that prevention is better than cure. All the evidence shows that the most effective leaders have highly evaluative traits, particularly of themselves, frequently asking - Are We Winning? Is This Going To Work?

Try the premortem. It might just save your life.

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