

PRE-MORTEM: UNDERSTANDING HOW THINGS MIGHT GO WRONG BEFORE THEY DO

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When to conduct a Pre-Mortem:

- Planning for an upcoming fire season
- Developing/revising a prescribed burn plan
- First on scene initial action planning
- Incident Management Team developing/revising an IAP
- Training for the above (e.g. Crew Leader courses, role-play exercises)



“The Patient Has Died : Perhaps not literally, but assume SOMETHING has gone horribly wrong.”

Because extreme events happen so rarely, we often have difficulties in imagining the worst-case scenario. February 7th 2009 was a timely reminder. Despite many predictions and warnings about the extreme conditions for the day, very few would have predicted the extent of the disaster that would unfold.

The Pre-Mortem (Gary Klein, 2007) is a tool that aims to uncover any potential adverse outcomes of a situation before they occur. The term is derived from the medical term post-mortem. A Post Mortem helps us learn why a patient has died.

Instead of deconstructing the causes of bad outcomes the Pre-Mortem attempts to identify the ‘fatal’ elements of the plan before it is implemented.



Pre-mortem scenarios can be based on either imagined scenarios or real world accidents or near misses

Steps to a Pre-Mortem:

- 1. Preparation:** Introduce participants to the concept, describe the scenario/plan in a small level of detail
- 2. Imagine a fiasco:** Say (something like) you are looking into a crystal ball and the plan has failed. It isn't a simple failure either. It is a total, embarrassing, devastating failure. However, we cannot make out the reason for the failure. Then ask, “What could have caused this?”
- 3. Generate reasons for failure:** Each person spends three minutes writing down all the reasons why they believe the failure occurred. Here is where intuitions of the team members come into play. Each person has a different set of experiences, a different set of scars, and a different mental model to bring to this task. You want to see what the collective knowledge in the room can produce.
- 4. Consolidate the lists:** When each member of the group is finished compiling their list, the facilitator goes around the room, asking each person to state one item from his or her list. Each item is recorded on a whiteboard. This process continues until each member of the group has revealed every item on their list. By the end of this step, you should have a comprehensive list of the group's concerns with the plan at hand.
- 5. Revisit the plan:** The team can address the two or three items of greatest concern, and then discuss ideas for avoiding or minimising other problems.
- 6. Periodically review the list:** Keep the spectre of failure fresh, and re-sensitise the team to the problems that may be emerging.

Potential Advantages of Pre-Mortems

- Brings together the collective knowledge of the group
- Reduces attachment to current plans
- Identifies where more resources might be needed
- Group members are sensitised to where things might go wrong (weak signals)
- Creates a climate where people can voice their concerns

In Comparison with other tools:

- Cheap , quick, straightforward
- Useful for exercises and operational planning
- Does not require complex calculations or estimates of uncertain values such as likelihood and consequence

