

How to run a pre-mortem on a project

A few weeks before

Send out an invitation to the team and wider people in the organisation.

24 hours before

Send invitees a few questions for them to consider beforehand. This is to get them in the right frame of mind for the pre-mortem. The guide suggests:

- what could slow us down or make us miss our deadline for launch?
- what are we already nervous about?
- where did you discover blind spots on past projects?
- how quickly can we respond when something goes wrong?
- who could own each of our biggest risk areas?
- think about where you might be able to over-achieve – if the project turned out to be a ground-breaking success, what might that look like?

On the day

Intro (5 min)

With everyone in the room, explain roughly what you will be doing and why. Encourage people to set aside daily tasks and get ready to dive deep into their imagination. No suggestion is silly – you want people to go to the lowest lows and highest highs.

Context (5 min)

Set the context. Pick a date and tell the team to fast-forward to say winter 2021, a world where your newly revamped product/service/project has been live for 6 months.

Splitting the teams: failure vs success (30 min)

Split them into 2 teams. One has the job of envisaging a world where the service is an unmitigated disaster. The worst failure possible. Ask the team to write down all the warning signs you could have ignored, all assumptions you believed in that were misguided, and what else could wreak havoc on your efforts.

The other team have the chance to think of a glorious future. The team and service have gone above and beyond, users love the service and you are were winning accolades for your work. Ask them to write down how the service/products has enhanced people's lives and what unexpected successes have you caused thanks to your fabulous work.

Both teams go off to find more comfortable seating and away from the confines of a meeting room to do this part. Both teams scribble their thoughts on post-its.

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Scrutinising each other's version of the future (20 min)

Next call the teams back to the meeting room to share their thoughts.

The first team share the optimistic view of the future and the other team push them to higher heights and thought of other signs of success you could encounter.

Then hear from the failure team and push yourselves to create more and more disastrous scenarios.

Vote (10 min)

Next up is a dot-vote what people thought are the top 3 risks and opportunities. Give everyone 5 votes and they can use them anyway they want (only requirement is to vote for at least one risk and one opportunity).

If someone wants to vote 4 times for a certain risk and once for a opportunity, then that is not a problem.

Encourage the team to vote for things that they can have influence over.

Coming up with practical next steps (30 min)

You now have 3 top risks and 3 top opportunities. Take these away and think of all the steps you could take to mitigate the risks and seize the opportunities.

Ask the team to make these as specific and clear as possible.

Sharing next steps (10 min)

Finally, ask the team to return to the meeting room and share the actions and ask for any extra input.

Wrap-up (5 min)

Normally you then assign specific tasks to people. Also promise to have a thorough re-visit of what you produced on the day in 6 months time to see if what you have done the things you thought about and if you could think of extras.

Retrospective (5 min)

After thanking the attendees ask for instant feedback.

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