



Premortem: The art of prospective hindsight

- **In a premortem, subject matter experts imagine themselves in the midst of a catastrophic program failure and diagnose what went wrong.**
- **Using prospective hindsight is the essence of any risk assessment.**
- **Identifying a program's highest risks is the first step in mitigation.**

Fans of television crime dramas know how much viewing time is often spent in the autopsy room, watching the medical examiner perform a postmortem on the crime victim. They also learn that much can be uncovered through this painstaking process. Similarly, in our workplaces, often much time is spent after a large project or program fails, trying to dissect what went wrong and how the failure could have been avoided. Many experts now agree that performing a postmortem on a dead project or program may not make good business sense. Rather, those experts are now advocating the performance of program premortems instead.

Premortems are the opposite of the dreaded postmortem. In a premortem, subject matter experts involved in a currently viable program imagine themselves in the midst of a catastrophic program failure. Although they know the program failed, they do not have any information about what went wrong. As a result, they employ a technique called “prospective hindsight” to attempt to determine the most likely reasons the program failed. Once those likely reasons have been identified, program administrators have a basis for taking action to strengthen the existing program.

Using prospective hindsight is the essence of any risk assessment. The first step in a risk assessment is to brainstorm about what could go wrong in the business process. When doing brainstorming, it may be helpful to put participants into the premortem mindset. This mindset includes asking questions such as:

- Where were we the most vulnerable?
- What went wrong?
- What were the possible causes?
- Which control gaps contributed to the failure?
- Were there symptoms or warning signs?

- What control activities could we have had in place to prevent the failure from occurring?

Asking these questions helps the risk assessment group focus in on the most critical risks to the business process. By including subject matter experts from a variety of functions that interact with the program being reviewed and allowing all participants to have an equal voice, the risk assessment group has a better chance of identifying risks and failure factors in all facets of the program.

Ultimately, identifying the program's highest risks is the first step in mitigation. Once the premortem has taken place, team members are better positioned to identify vulnerabilities and control gaps, and develop effective ways of managing the high priority risks.

Researchers also find that participating in a risk assessment process makes team members more sensitive to developing vulnerabilities and risks throughout the life of the program. Once employees become more aware of their program's risks, they can recognize the warning signs of impending problems much quicker and take timely evasive action when necessary.

Suggested action steps: Do not wait until you have a catastrophic program failure before taking action. Employ prospective hindsight as part of your risk assessment strategy. Think about the program areas that you believe have the most risk. Practice the art of prospective hindsight by performing risk assessments on those business processes.

If you have questions, please contact Jeanine Kuwik at Jeanine.Kuwik@state.mn.us or (651) 201-8148.