

The Premortem Exercise: Visualizing Catastrophic Failure (and Success)



By Don Gomez

The after-action review (AAR) is one of the simplest tools we use in the Army to learn and grow as an organization. Whether a squad gathered in the dark immediately after a patrol, giving their quick “3 ups and 3 downs” or a highly structured, multi-day review in an air-conditioned building that brings together unit leaders, observers/trainers, and opposition force commanders at the National Training Center - the AAR is tried and true.

During the AAR, leaders have the opportunity to discuss exactly what went right and what went wrong that led to the ultimate success or failure of the mission or event. If done well, the AAR is captured and those lessons shared and fed directly into the next planning cycle. If done poorly, the AAR will have served as another “check the box” requirement, just another thing that has to be done before going home.

But what if we did the AAR before the mission? What if we imagined ourselves standing in the dark after the patrol or in the air-conditioned building, discussing how things went so badly (or so well) before we ever left the line of departure?

Borrowed from business and project management, this technique is known as a [premortem](#) exercise. We know that a postmortem is used to determine the cause of death after the fact. In our case, we use the premortem exercise to imagine the possibilities before we even begin. This technique exploits the imagination and experience of individuals and teams in a way that deliberate planning often misses.

As the gloomy name implies, the premortem is great for risk management. Additionally, I've found it best for high risk/high reward missions or events. This exercise is designed to be done collaboratively in a small team. It doesn't have to take very long - less than an hour.

The exercise is simple - gather your team and start with this question:

“What are some of the worst possible things that can happen when we do X?”

Whatever the mission, there are things that can go terribly wrong. Look at the extremes.

-What would total failure look like?

-What about near-total failure?

Solicit these answers from the team as a brainstorming session. Write everything down, especially the absurd and seemingly unlikely ideas. Encourage creative and far-reaching responses. Once you have a list, you can start an analysis with some basic questions:

-How likely is this?

-What would have to happen to make this a reality?

- What are some of the things that we would see leading up to this?
- Have we seen something like this before?

Unlike conducting a thorough deliberate risk management exercise, the premortem focuses on catastrophic failure. These catastrophic failures may seem too absurd to include in formal planning, but make sense during the premortem. They often include overlooked administrative bumbles, public relations nightmares, or logistical challenges that might have been neglected during deliberate planning.

With a list of potential failures identified, the next part is leading a conversation on how these can be prevented. The responses are often simple or tasks you may have thought were implied. By identifying the catastrophic failure together as a team, you can then build a shared understanding of the risk and reasons a specific control is necessary. This can pay dividends down the line when your team is asking themselves, “Why are we doing this?”

Often, the controls implemented from a premortem exercise will mitigate other risks as well.

In building controls, you should pay attention to whether any of them will lead to a degradation of any capability. Mitigating risk-to-force to zero is not helpful if it increases your risk to mission.

While the premortem is a fantastic tool for risk management, it can also be used to imagine success. The exercise looks the same, but instead of catastrophic failure, you imagine overwhelming success. Now the question is:

“What would a huge win look like?”

Write it down and solicit more input from the team, capturing all considerations no matter how absurd (and some of them will be truly absurd). Again, conduct an analysis of what outcomes are feasible – even if unlikely. Then, start asking similar questions:

- How can X actually happen?
- What would have to happen for X to be true?
- What would we see in the environment if this were happening?

Running the premortem for success can reveal opportunities and pathways that you may miss in traditional planning. When personally leading this exercise, I've been blown away by the goals and objectives offered by others - often seemingly out of reach. Through creativity and conversation, it is possible to build a roadmap for achieving these goals, and then making them a reality.

This isn't a wishful thinking exercise or a "believe it and it will happen" type of scenario. The idea is to take the output of the premortem exercise and integrate it into the deliberate planning required to accomplish the mission. The premortem is not a replacement for the traditional planning processes and risk management. Instead, it is a creative exercise that can be used to exploit the creativity and experience of your team and illuminate previously unforeseen risks and opportunities.

Captain Don Gomez is a Psychological Operations officer currently assigned as an Instructor of Arabic at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

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