AVT BUSINESS SCHOOL

RADICAL PRACTICALITY · PRACTICE 02

The Pre-Mortem

How imagining failure before you start is the most reliable way to prevent it

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Thirty-Minute Practice That Saves Projects

The pre-mortem is one of the most effective risk-identification techniques ever developed. It takes thirty minutes, requires no training, and can be run by anyone. Its core mechanism is a single grammatical shift: instead of asking “what could go wrong?” it asks “what did go wrong?” — by stipulating that the project has already failed and asking the team to explain why.

That small reframe exploits a documented cognitive phenomenon called prospective hindsight. Research by Mitchell, Russo, and Pennington at Wharton, Cornell, and the University of Colorado found that imagining an event has already occurred increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%. Gary Klein formalized the technique in a 2007 Harvard Business Review article and has spent three decades refining it. Experimental evaluation by Veinott, Klein, and Wiggins found that the pre-mortem reduced overconfidence in plans significantly more than any other critique method tested — roughly twice the effect of traditional pros-and-cons analysis.

Despite this evidence, the pre-mortem remains vanishingly rare in organizational practice. This white paper explains the science behind it, why it works where conventional risk management fails, and how to start using it this week.

CHAPTER 1

Why Plans Fail

The Planning Fallacy

In 1979, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky identified what they called the planning fallacy: the systematic tendency for people to underestimate the time, cost, and risk of completing a task while overestimating the benefits. The bias is so robust that it persists even when people are aware of it. In a classic demonstration, students asked to predict when they would complete their honors thesis were wildly optimistic: 70% took longer than their own "realistic" estimate.

The fallacy is not confined to students. Bent Flyvbjerg's analysis of over 2,000 public infrastructure projects worldwide found average cost overruns of 28% for transportation projects, rising to 45% for rail projects, with schedule delays averaging 50%. The Sydney Opera House was budgeted at AUD 7 million with a four-year timeline; it took fourteen years and cost AUD 102 million — a 1,400% overrun.

The planning fallacy operates through what Kahneman calls the "inside view": planners focus on the specifics of their particular project, constructing an optimistic narrative about how it will unfold, while ignoring the base rate of failure in similar projects. The corrective — the "outside view" — requires asking how often projects like this one actually succeed. Almost nobody does this naturally.

The Silence Problem

But the planning fallacy is only half the story. The other half is social. In most organizations, voicing doubts about a plan that leadership has endorsed is career-limiting. People who raise concerns are perceived as negative, unsupportive, or "not team players." The result is a systematic suppression of critical information at precisely the moment it is most needed: before the project begins.

Klein observed this pattern repeatedly in his consulting work on complex decision support systems. Teams would move forward with plans that several members privately believed were flawed, because the social cost of dissent was too high. The problems that were visible to individuals remained invisible to the group — until it was too late.

> *Projects fail at a spectacular rate. One reason is that too many people are reluctant to speak up about their reservations during the all-important planning phase.*

This is not a communication failure. It is a structural one. The default social dynamics of a planning meeting reward optimism and punish skepticism. Any intervention that hopes to improve planning must address these dynamics directly. The pre-mortem does exactly that.

CHAPTER 2

Prospective Hindsight: The Science

The Foundational Study

In 1989, Deborah Mitchell of the Wharton School, Jay Russo of Cornell, and Nancy Pennington of the University of Colorado published a study titled “Back to the Future: Temporal Perspective in the Explanation of Events.” The study examined what happens when people are asked to explain an outcome that has definitely occurred versus one that might occur.

The finding was striking: when an outcome was presented as certain (it has already happened), participants generated significantly more explanations — and more specific, episodic explanations — than when the outcome was presented as merely possible. The certainty frame unlocked a different quality of reasoning. Participants weren’t just generating more guesses; they were accessing a richer, more detailed mental simulation of how things could unfold.

This phenomenon — prospective hindsight — is the psychological engine that powers the pre-mortem. By stipulating that the project has failed, you shift the team’s cognitive frame from “it might happen” to “it did happen.” That shift increases the quality and quantity of identified failure reasons by 30%.

The Experimental Validation

In 2010, Beth Veinott, Gary Klein, and Sterling Wiggins conducted the first controlled experimental evaluation of the pre-mortem technique. The study used 178 university students who were asked to evaluate a lockdown plan for an H1N1 pandemic scenario — a setup that proved prescient a decade later.

Participants were randomly assigned to five conditions: a baseline (no evaluation), a simple critique, a pre-mortem (imagine the plan has failed — explain why), a pros-and-cons list, and a cons-only analysis. The results were clear:

- **Confidence reduction:** The pre-mortem group showed the greatest reduction in overconfidence, significantly more than all other conditions — approximately twice the effect of the pros-and-cons method.
- **Solution generation:** After identifying problems and generating solutions, the pre-mortem group showed the greatest increase in justified confidence — meaning their post-exercise confidence was based on having actually addressed the weaknesses, not on blind optimism.
- **Mechanism:** The researchers attributed the pre-mortem's effectiveness to two factors: the certainty frame (stipulating failure rather than speculating about it) and the focus on failure reasons specifically, which produces a qualitatively different kind of thinking than balanced "pros and cons."

A 2016 study by Gallop and Bischoff extended these findings, using 101 experienced program managers and engineers. Teams using the pre-mortem technique identified significantly more "quality risks" — risks that were both creative and plausible — than teams using standard brainstorming.

CHAPTER 3

How the Pre-Mortem Works

Klein developed the pre-mortem around 1991, initially to improve planning in his own consulting firm. Over three decades, the method has been adopted by corporate boardrooms, the U.S. military, wildland firefighting operations, Wall Street trading desks, and crisis management teams worldwide. Nobel laureates Daniel Kahneman and Richard Thaler have both publicly endorsed it.

The protocol is deliberately simple. Complexity would defeat the purpose: the pre-mortem succeeds because it is easy to run, requires no special training, and takes twenty to thirty minutes.

The Protocol

STEP	WHAT HAPPENS
1. Brief	The team has been briefed on the plan and is sitting together. Everyone understands what the project is supposed to achieve and how.
2. Reframe	The leader announces: "Imagine we are a year in the future. This project has failed — not a minor hiccup, but a complete, spectacular failure. Your job now is to explain why."
3. Write	Each person independently and silently writes down every reason they can think of for the failure. This step is critical: independent writing prevents anchoring on the first idea raised and ensures that quieter team members contribute fully. Two to three minutes.
4. Share	Round-robin sharing. Each person reads one item from their list, then the next person, continuing until all items are captured. No discussion yet — just collection.
5. Discuss	The team discusses the list: Which risks are most likely? Which are most severe? Which are within our control? Which have we not planned for at all?

6. Act	Update the plan. Assign owners to the most significant risks. Decide what to monitor. In some cases, decide not to proceed.

Why the Grammar Matters

The difference between “what could go wrong?” and “what did go wrong?” is not semantic. It is cognitive. The conditional tense (“could”) keeps failure at a distance — hypothetical, unlikely, someone else’s problem. The past tense (“did”) makes failure a settled fact that demands explanation. The brain processes these frames differently. In the past-tense frame, people access more specific, concrete, experience-based reasoning. They stop generating generic risks (“budget overrun”) and start generating specific, plausible scenarios (“we lost the lead engineer in month three because we hadn’t addressed her concerns about the architecture”).

Why the Silence Matters

Independent writing before group discussion is the second critical design element. Without it, the pre-mortem degrades into a standard brainstorm dominated by the loudest or most senior voices. The silent writing step ensures that every person’s concerns are captured before social dynamics can filter them. Klein’s own guidance is emphatic: the writing must happen individually and in silence. It is not optional.

CHAPTER 4

Why It Works Where Risk Registers Don't

Most organizations have formal risk management processes. They maintain risk registers, conduct risk assessments, and assign probability and impact scores. And yet projects continue to fail at extraordinary rates. The pre-mortem succeeds where these methods do not because it addresses the three root causes that formal risk management ignores.

1. It Solves the Social Problem

Risk registers are typically compiled by project managers and reviewed by steering committees. The people closest to the work — the ones most likely to see the real risks — are often not in the room. Even when they are, the social dynamics of a formal review meeting suppress dissent. Nobody wants to be the person who derails the project by raising an uncomfortable concern.

The pre-mortem inverts these dynamics entirely. Finding flaws is the assignment. Pessimism is the task. The person who identifies the most creative failure mode is the star of the exercise, not its spoiler. As Klein writes, the pre-mortem "legitimizes dissent and rewards people for being imaginative."

2. It Produces Specific Risks, Not Generic Ones

Risk registers tend to fill up with the same generic entries: "budget overrun," "scope creep," "resource constraints," "stakeholder alignment." These are categories, not risks. They are too vague to act on and too familiar to trigger genuine concern. The pre-mortem's past-tense framing forces specificity. "The project failed because the marketing team launched the campaign two weeks before the product was ready, because nobody had agreed on a definition of 'ready.'" That is a risk you can act on.

3. It Counters Overconfidence at the Right Moment

Risk assessments typically happen after the plan has been developed and approved — when the team is invested in the plan's success and psychologically committed to its logic. The pre-mortem is designed to run at exactly this moment, when overconfidence is at its peak, and to use the certainty of failure as a circuit-breaker. The Veinott study confirmed that this timing is critical: the pre-mortem reduced overconfidence more effectively than any other method precisely because it intervened at the point of maximum optimism.

CHAPTER 5

The Mistakes That Ruin Pre-Mortems

The pre-mortem is simple. It is not foolproof. Klein and subsequent researchers have identified several failure modes that can neutralize the exercise's effectiveness:

Running It with Senior Executives Present

This is the single most common mistake. When the most powerful person in the room is listening, people self-censor — even in an exercise explicitly designed to surface concerns. The pre-mortem works best when participants feel genuinely safe to speculate about failure. If the CEO or the project sponsor is in the room, that safety evaporates. Run the pre-mortem with the working team. Brief the executives on the results afterward.

Skipping the Silent Writing

If the leader says "Imagine this has failed — who wants to go first?" the exercise is already compromised. The first speaker anchors the group. Quieter members defer. The richest insights — which often come from people who don't typically speak first — never surface. The two to three minutes of silent, independent writing is the exercise's most important structural feature.

Treating It as a Brainstorm

The pre-mortem is not an open-ended idea generation session. It has a specific frame (the project has failed), a specific output (a list of failure reasons), and a specific purpose (updating the plan). When it drifts into general problem-solving or blue-sky thinking, it loses its debiasing power. The constraint is the source of the value.

Doing It Once and Filing the Results

A pre-mortem produces a living risk list. If the output goes into a slide deck that nobody revisits, the exercise was theater. The most effective teams revisit their pre-mortem output at key milestones, checking whether the identified risks are materializing and whether the mitigations are holding.

CHAPTER 6

A Practical Guide to Running Your First Pre-Mortem

Before the Session

1. Choose a project that is about to begin or has recently launched. The pre-mortem works best when the plan is fresh and the team is optimistic.
2. Schedule thirty minutes. You will probably not need all of it, but protect the full window.
3. Decide who should be in the room: the working team, not the executive sponsors. Six to ten people is ideal.
4. Prepare a single sentence describing the project's intended outcome. This is the "success state" that you will invert.

The Session

Open with the reframe. Say something like: "We're going to try something different. Imagine it is twelve months from now, and this project has failed completely. Not a minor setback — a total failure. I want each of you, working alone and in silence, to write down every reason you can think of for why it failed. You have three minutes. Go."

After three minutes, go around the table. Each person reads one reason. Move to the next person. Keep going until every reason has been shared. Write them on a whiteboard or shared document as they're read. Don't discuss yet — just collect.

Once the list is complete, discuss as a group. Cluster related items. Identify the three to five risks that are most likely and most consequential. For each, ask: What can we do to reduce the likelihood? Who owns this? How will we know if it's materializing?

Update the plan based on what you learned. This is the step most teams skip, and it is the step that makes the difference.

After the Session

- Share the risk list with the full project team, including sponsors.
- Revisit the list at major milestones. Ask: “Are any of these risks materializing? Did we miss anything new?”
- Note which pre-mortem predictions were accurate and which were not. Over multiple projects, this builds organizational judgment.

CHAPTER 7

Beyond Projects: Where Else the Pre-Mortem Works

Klein's technique has spread far beyond project management. Wherever a team is about to commit to a course of action under uncertainty, the pre-mortem adds value:

— **Strategic decisions:** Before approving a market entry, acquisition, or product launch, run a pre-mortem on the strategy itself. "It's two years from now and this acquisition destroyed value. Why?"

— **Hiring decisions:** Before extending an offer to a senior hire, imagine the hire didn't work out. What went wrong? This surfaces assumptions about culture fit, expectations, and onboarding that interviews often miss.

— **Policy and regulation:** Before implementing a new policy, imagine it failed to achieve its intended effect — or produced unintended consequences. Government agencies and military organizations use pre-mortems routinely for this purpose.

— **Personal decisions:** The pre-mortem works just as well for individuals. Before committing to a career change, a major investment, or any high-stakes decision, spend five minutes imagining it went wrong and writing down why. You will surface concerns your optimism was concealing.

CHAPTER 8

The AVT Challenge

The pre-mortem is Radical Practicality in its purest form. It is genuinely unconventional: despite thirty years of evidence, fewer than 5% of organizations use it routinely. And it is immediately actionable: you can run one in your next meeting, with no budget, no training, and no permission required.

The orthodoxy it challenges is among the deepest in business: that good planning builds confidence in the plan. The pre-mortem says the opposite. Good planning should reduce confidence — because it should reveal the things you didn't know you didn't know. Confidence that survives a pre-mortem is earned confidence. Confidence that was never tested is just optimism.

Our challenge to every AVT member:

1. Run a pre-mortem on your next significant project.
2. Follow the protocol exactly: reframe, silent writing, round-robin sharing, discussion, plan update.
3. Keep the most senior person out of the room.
4. Revisit the risk list at the first milestone. Note what was accurate.
5. Share one observation with the AVT community.

The pre-mortem takes thirty minutes. It costs nothing. It requires no training. And it might be the most important half-hour you spend on any project this year.

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This white paper is part of AVT's 25th Anniversary Program: 25 Practices Nobody Uses (But Should). The pre-mortem is Practice 02 because it addresses the most common and most costly failure in organizational life: the failure to surface what people already know but are afraid to say.