

Pre-Mortem Template

Test your decision before you commit

Pre-Mortem Template © 2026 John Bornholt. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/. You may copy, adapt and share this tool, including commercially, if you credit: “Adapted from Pre-Mortem Template by John Bornholt, from LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment, uncertaindecisions.com”. Quotations and cited works belong to their authors and are not covered by this licence.

What is a pre-mortem?

A pre-mortem is a structured exercise - set out by research psychologist Gary Klein (2007) - in which you imagine that your decision has already been made and has failed. By mentally travelling to a future failure before it happens, you can identify risks, challenge assumptions, and strengthen your plan while you still have time to act. Chapter 9 of LIFE: Our Uncertain Experiment introduces it, and Chapter 19 shows a worked example.

“It is twelve months from today. I made the decision. It went badly. What happened? What did I miss? What should I have done differently?”

How to use this template

1. Complete Part 1 to capture the decision.
2. Imagine the decision has failed, and write down the single most probable reason (Part 2).
3. Work backwards to the warning signs (Part 3).
4. Carry both into Step 4 (Part 4).

You do not need a list of everything that could go wrong. Step 5 (Assess the Risks) covers the range. Here you want the one cause worth designing against. You can also run a pre-mortem on doing nothing.

PART 1 The Decision Snapshot

Complete this section before you begin the pre-mortem exercise.

Question	Your answer
The decision I am making	
Why I am making this decision now	
The intended outcome / goal	
Key assumptions I am relying on	
What success looks like in 6-12 months	
Decision deadline	
Who is involved or will be affected	

Date: _____

PART 2 Fast-Forward to Failure

Imagine it is one year from today. The decision was made and it has failed completely. The outcome you hoped for never materialised. Write the story of what went wrong. Do not censor yourself.

My failure story

--

PROMPTED QUESTIONS (USE THESE IF YOU GET STUCK)

The main reason it failed was...

I failed to anticipate...

I should have known that...

The single most probable reason it failed

--

PART 3 Warning Signs

Work backwards from the failure you have just imagined. Before it was too late to do anything, what would you be able to observe to tell you that things are going wrong? List signals you could notice, not feelings you might have.

Warning sign

How and when I would notice it

PART 4 Carry Forward

- ☐ I have identified the single most probable cause of failure.
 - ☐ I have identified warning signs I could observe early enough to act.
 - ☐ I have considered whether doing nothing, or a smaller test first, is a better option.
 - ☐ I have shared this with at least one person not involved in the decision.
-

Carry into Step 4: the most probable cause of failure and its warning signs. Watch for the warning signs in Step 8.

Sources

Klein, G. (2007). Performing a project premortem. Harvard Business Review, 85(9), 18-19.

Introduced the pre-mortem: assuming the decision has already failed and asking why, rather than asking whether it will succeed.