

The Premortem — Facilitator Run Sheet

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MINUTES

4–12

PEOPLE

print props

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The Premortem — Facilitator Guide

A 25-minute, 4–12 person review that runs backwards from a future failure. Before you launch (or after a miss), the team assumes the project has already failed and writes the story of how — which surfaces the risks people were too polite to raise while it still felt optimistic. A premortem is a retrospective pointed at the future.

Objectives

By the end of the activity, participants will have:

1. Written, silently, the story of how this plan failed — pulling out the risks nobody was polite enough to raise while the mood was optimistic.
 2. Clustered the root causes and given each of the top three an early-warning signal they'd actually notice in time.
 3. Committed one or two preventive actions with a named owner and a by-when — risks named while they're still cheap to fix.
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When to use this activity

- A significant plan is about to start and the kickoff feels great — which is exactly when nobody says the quiet part.
 - A launch or milestone is close enough that a named risk is still cheap to defuse.
 - Someone has gone quiet in every review of this plan; a premortem gives silence a safe way to speak.
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Why running backwards works

Optimism mutes good judgment. In a healthy kickoff nobody wants to name the thing that could sink it. By declaring the failure already certain, the premortem makes naming it safe and even required — and turns hindsight into foresight while there's still time to act.

Setup

Space: one shared board with three columns — **Root causes** • **Early-warning signals** • **Preventive actions**. Online, the same three columns live on a shared board.

Materials per person: sticky notes and a pen — the failure story and its causes, written silently.

Materials for the room: the card faces from [the-premortem-prop-cards.pdf](#) — a failure-story card, a root-cause card, an early-warning-signal card, a preventive-action card, an owner-and-by-when card, a blank.

Grouping: 4–12 people who are part of a plan that hasn't happened yet (or a review of one that just did).

Roles: everyone writes before anyone speaks; you declare the failure certain, run the round-robin, and refuse any cause that ends without a signal.

Optional: put [the-premortem-activity-poster.pdf](#) on the wall so the two rules — “everyone writes before anyone speaks” and “every cause needs a signal” — stay visible. No projector, no account, no online form.

How to run it

Time	Phase	What you do
0–3	Set the scene	Say it plainly: “It’s three months from now. The project failed. Everyone write the story of how it happened.” Make the failure certain, not hypothetical.
3–10	Write the failure	Everyone writes the failure story and its causes silently. No talking — this kills anchoring on the loudest voice.
10–16	Share & post	Round-robin: each person reads one cause and posts it under Root causes. Cluster duplicates as you go.
16–21	Signal it	For the top three causes, name an early-warning signal — the thing you’d see two months out that tells you this failure is underway.
21–25	Assign	For the top cause (or two), agree one preventive action with an owner and a by-when. A cause with no signal and no action is just a worry.

The card

The three columns are the three card faces: a root cause posted under the first earns an early-warning signal on the second and, for the top one or two, a preventive action with an owner and a by-when on the third. Keep the failure-story card’s opening line (“it’s three months from now”) as the frame the whole board hangs on.

Failure modes

- **The causes are all safe and obvious.** Nobody named the real one. Ask directly: “if this fails and you’d get blamed — what would you say it was?” Then write that.
- **Every cause has a signal but no owner.** Signals without watchers don’t fire. Assign a name to each of the top three before anyone leaves.
- **It turns into a complaint session about another team.** Reframe to what this team can act on; park the rest as a named dependency with an owner who will raise it elsewhere.

Variations

- **After an actual miss:** run it forward instead — the failure already happened; the exercise becomes a straight retro with better honesty.
- **Two teams, one plan:** each runs it separately, then compare; the differences are where the handoffs are.
- **Standing risk review:** re-run monthly on the same plan; the signals that keep reappearing are the real ones.

Facilitation notes

- Say the premise as fact, not hypothesis — “it failed” gives people permission; “what if it failed” asks for one.
- Reward the person who names the uncomfortable risk first; that’s the behavior the whole format exists to buy.

Put it on the wall

Print `the-premortem-activity-poster.pdf` (A3) to hold the premise, the three columns and the two rules on one wall while you run it.

Props in this folder

- `the-premortem-prop-cards.pdf` — poker-spec print sheet (63.5 × 88.9 mm, bleed and cut guides): failure-story, root-cause, early-warning-signal, preventive-action and owner-and-by-when cards, blanks, branded backs
 - `the-premortem-run-sheet.pdf` — the print edition: this run sheet + the debrief, bound as one A4 document with bookmarks (`-Letter.pdf` is US Letter)
 - `the-premortem-activity-poster.pdf` — the whole review on one A3 wall sheet
 - `the-premortem-guide.md` · `-debrief.md` · `-start-here.md` — the facilitator guide, the debrief, the one-page start here
 - `the-premortem-license.md` — what you may do, how to rebrand, what shipped when
 - `SKILL.md` · `the-premortem.zip` — the machine-readable manifest, and the whole folder in one download
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Agent version

Every file in this folder has a stable public URL — an AI agent can fetch the cards, the debrief and this run sheet with three curl commands (see `SKILL.md`). The paper version needs nothing but a three-column board, sticky notes and a pen each.

The Premortem — Debrief

A premortem earns its keep only when a worry becomes a cause, the cause gets a signal, and the signal gets a watcher. Three words on a board is a list; an owner and a by-when is protection.

Use with `the-premortem-guide.md` . The assign round at minute 21 is the compressed version; this sheet is the full one.

How to run this debrief

- Point at the board while you talk — causes, signals and actions are already in front of the team; the debrief pressure-tests them, it doesn't re-collect them.
 - Push every signal twice: would you truly notice it two months out, and who watches it? Unwatched signals are decoration.
 - Close on one thing done differently this week, with a name and a date against it.
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Read the board

1. **Which cause made the most people nod.** The one everyone thought but nobody had said — that's what the format was for.
2. **Which causes are the same cause in different clothes.** Cluster them before you act; five notes about "the handoff" is one cause with five symptoms.
3. **Whose cause is missing.** If someone went quiet mid-round, their risk is the one you didn't write down. Go get it.

The four debrief questions

- For the cause you picked first: what is the early-warning signal, and would you actually notice it two months out — or only in hindsight?
- Who owns the signal, how often do they look, and what happens when they see it?
- Is the preventive action a real change, or a meeting to discuss the change?
- If this cause fires anyway, what's the fallback — or is “we'll deal with it then” the honest answer?

Failure modes of the debrief

Failure mode	Why it happens	The rescue
The causes are all safe	Nobody named the real one	Ask directly: “if this fails and you'd get blamed — what would you say it was?”
Signals with no watchers	Everyone agreed, nobody volunteered	Assign a name to each of the top three before anyone leaves.
It becomes a complaint session	The real risk sits with another team	Park it as a named dependency with an owner who will raise it elsewhere.
The action is a meeting	Real change feels expensive	Push for the cheapest concrete move that fits this week.