Issues Covered

A regular comment in knowledge reviews on projects, is that project managers are undertaking as part of the inception review process a ‘pre-mortem’ approach to try to identify problems in advance of starting a project.

Risks

- Lessons not being learnt and adopted from previous projects.
- Project success bias effect – overoptimistic assumptions being made on a project.
- Divergent interpretations around scope and clients brief leading to confusion during the project.
- Lack of consistent process to undertake a pre-mortem.
- Team member frustration at wasteful re-work and not ‘getting it right first time.”
- Avoidable Project losses not identified.
- Failure to criticise in a standard review meeting, whilst a project is on-going due to team and managerial dynamics as well as cultural issues around public criticism.

Outline

This note highlights a technique that organisations utilise successfully since it was first set out in 2007 by Gary Klein.

As a background, from many project reviews, attendees have highlighted that on some projects the problems, they would have at a project at a later stage, were in hindsight visible like ‘an elephant in the room’ but at the start of the project’s inception meeting they had neglected to consider.

Unlike a typical critiquing session, in which project team members are asked what might go wrong, the pre mortem operates on the assumption that the 'patient' in this case the project has not proceeded as well as anticipated.

Klein’s quote is a useful guideline “*In the fantasy world of the premortem, it is already over. You are up the creek without a paddle and the crocodiles are circling the boat. Everything went as badly as you could have feared. Now: why?”*

A good summary picture of the process is below (Serrat 2012)

Figure: Conducting a Premortem

Another regular observation from knowledge reviews is that we can with enthusiasm, dive into projects before we have fully understood both the success and failure factors in a project.

Once the project starts it can be difficult to get the project team to highlight the issues and challenges because regular meetings are governed by several human factors such as: -

- Not wishing to embarrass fellow colleagues.
- Not looking like a poor collaborator by criticising others.
- The perception that little will change even if you do speak up.
- Deferring to leaders.
- Don't want to look foolish.
- Protecting your own interests
- Plan on paper seem reasonable and plausible.

Benefits

This approach looks to encourage the project team as a collective, to look ahead and identify the challenges that could cause everything to fail and to plot a course to navigate around them – it's better to spot the icebergs before you hit them.

In terms of project team dynamics there are the following benefits:

- Describing weaknesses that no one else has mentioned, team members feel valued for their intelligence and experience, and others learn from them.
- The exercise also sensitises the team to pick up early signs of trouble once the project gets under way.
- This approach will not solve every problem, but it aims to reduce them.
- In the final analysis a pre-mortem may be the best way to circumvent any need for a painful post-mortem via a knowledge review

Starting off - Preliminaries

This is a simple 3 stage process It's recommended to complete every step, in the order outlined to achieve effectiveness.

Before outlining the process, a few rules picked up from personal and others experiences in using this technique:

- As part of the pre-mortem review – look to see if there are learning points or knowledge reviews on within your organisation or through your communities of practice/forums, that you can look for lessons learnt on projects of a similar nature.
- Set aside at least two hours of uninterrupted time.
    - If that seems a considerable length of time, ask yourself, how much time it will take to rectify the situation, if disaster strikes.
    - A moment's thought now saves hours of wasted re-work later.
    - It's an investment not a cost.

- All team members ideally should be present. Invite everyone with a significant role to the pre-mortem.
    - The reason for having all team members present, is that the project could face several blind spots that could still explode during the project.
    - One of the reasons why the team will be unaware of them, could well be because the person who could have alerted to you to them wasn't invited.
- Everyone is equally important in their contribution at the pre-mortem. If you are a senior manager, your job is to encourage all participants to engage and bring out their ideas.
- The pre-mortem ideally must be a face-to-face meeting. This process will not work as effectively, via email/instant messenger etc.
    - Live Video chats using a range of collaborative tools (Miro/Trello MS Whiteboard) would be the next best solution. But unless it is physically impossible, get everyone together in one room. This is the preferred approach and the one that maximises the benefits.
- One person should do nothing but take notes.
    - Lots of important problems and solutions get tossed around during a pre-mortem.
    - They'll be useless to you if someone isn't in charge of making sure they're captured and remembered.
- Ensure all participants are familiar with the details of the overall project plan.
    - Distribute copies to attendees as needed at least a couple of days (ideally a week) prior to the session – you want as much as possible to give people time for reflection on the following question.
- The question to be considered by the group.
    - *Imagine that we are 12 months in the future. Despite this group's best efforts, the project was a complete and absolute failure.*
        - *Your role is to determine why and how the failure occurred.*
        - *Before the meeting and taking no longer than 15 minutes, write down as many reasons for failure as you can think of.*
        - *Be bold – no problem is off limits you owe it to the team and yourself to imagine the worst.*
        - *Take 5 minutes before the meeting to write it up.*

Meeting Stage 1 Getting the Problems out.

- Some are basic meeting etiquette but are here purely as reminders.
- Ask people to put their smart phones away, to help improve focus.
- As it is a long meeting, you might wish to get some refreshments in for people.

- Ensure the note taker is prepared to record all key questions, discussion points, decisions and required actions.
- Remind people of the question, if necessary, write it up on a flipchart or on a PowerPoint slide.
- The goal is to create a completely exhaustive list of things that could go wrong.
    - Any road taken on the journey is allowed.
- **The only thing not allowed during this phase is proposed solutions**.
    - These are not recommended, because they draw the team away from getting every single problem out in the open.
    - If you have a team of talented and solution-oriented people such as engineers, this can be one of the more difficult parts of the meeting.
- Get people to write on paper or large sticky notes the issues and put them on a flip chart/wall. (Or a virtual whiteboard – Miro or Trello board)
    - This should take no longer than 30 minutes. (If people have done their homework, then in effect, they will have spent 45 minutes on this question.
    - Make sure each person has shared one reason for failure.

Meeting Stage 2 – Top 10 problems

- So, at this stage you are likely to have quite a few problems on the flip chart and you now need in Phase 2 to prioritise and group some of these problems into a top 10 of problems to focus on
- This should take no longer than 30 minutes.
- **Focus on showstoppers**. The problems you focus on solving should be critical to your project. In other words, if it occurs, will it severely impact the project? If the answer is no, then remove it; it does not belong on your pre-mortem list.
    - This rule will eliminate many of the minor issues that came up—and helped you find bigger problems—but are not really mission critical.
- **Pick problems likely to happen**. Don't waste time solving problems that aren't likely to happen.
    - Instead, try to home in on the "elephant in the room" problems that came up—the ones everyone was secretly worried about but never brought up until now.
- **Discard problems you have no control over**. Every project will face some external risks that you simply cannot control. Toss those out now because there is nothing you can do about them. As you move to Stage 3, you are focusing on problems you can fix.

Meeting Stage 3 – Solutions

- This in some cases can be the easiest part of the exercise as the attendees in the meeting will already have been reflecting during the meetings potential solutions as engineers love to solve problems.
- Ideally this should take about 45 minutes.

- Go through each problem in your top ten list and either:
    - Create a proactive solution for it (best for problems facing you now), or
    - Define a backup plan (best for problems that could happen but haven't yet).
- Most importantly, a solution is not complete until action items are created and assigned to team members to complete.
    - The role of the note taker is important here – they ideally need to get the notes out within 48 hours of the meeting and circulated to the team for comment and sign off within 3 working days of the meeting to ensure that its accurate and that people are happy with the actions they agreed to.
- Never forget: this processes effectiveness is reduced. if you and the team get all the way to creating a solution but do not carry it out because no one knew they had to act.
    - Pre-mortem lessons learnt are not until they are applied by those who are responsible.
- Store the notes in a convenient place – a dedicated project page or a centralised hub.
- Make sure everyone knows about them.
- On an ongoing basis, get the team to review the notes and actions to ensure that the problems haven't occurred or there are symptoms of the problems popping up so that you can put your action plan into action.
- Thank people for their candour and foresight.
- Celebrate project success!

References

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