

YES! AND... CREATIVE GORILLA # 94

By placing yourself in the future and visualising why something has gone wrong, you can help ensure it goes right...

Reduce Risk Creatively ...

“One does not have to be a mad scientist to travel in time” – Authors of research paper: “Back to the future. Temporal Perspective in the Explanation of Events”



Mad scientists using time travel simulator...

How might you help ensure that a project does not go wrong? Curious?

As many of you know, I like to try different techniques that I encounter. Researching material for a Gorilla article last year, I stumbled across one such technique from Gary Klein of Applied Research Associates (you can find a copy of his article [here](#)).

In the article, Gary talks about using a technique called the *Premortem* at the beginning of a project. Instead of asking project members, “What might go wrong with this project?”, Gary has people think themselves in to the future when the project has gone wrong and asks, “What went wrong?”

In Gary’s version, individuals write down as many reasons as they can, the project leader records these on a flipchart and then uses the

data to strengthen the project plan. This technique is based on a concept known as Prospective Hindsight.

Research on this concept has shown that people are able to come up with richer and more numerous explanations of why an event might happen when they are told to imagine that the event has actually happened. (After much digging, I found a copy of the [research paper](#) mentioned with the above quotation)

SO

Having read Gary’s article, I decided to use his technique with a client’s project team. In their case, they were working on a pilot of a major project that had to deliver a number of benefits. Obtaining these benefits was crucial to receiving more resources to roll out the project further. We introduced a section on Premortem in one of their regular project meetings.

In summary, here is what we did:

- We asked the group to imagine that it is the date when the Programme Director has to present the results of the pilot to the Board. A little theatrically and humorously we explained that the Programme Director had

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been fired (much laughter) because the pilot had failed to deliver any of the benefits he had promised (we entitled the section "Predicting Benefit Fraud")

- We asked individuals to write down why this had happened.
- We collected the reasons, taking one idea per person until we had exhausted all ideas.
- The group voted for those they thought were the most likely to happen and create the biggest impact.
- Sub groups worked on the priority items to create actions to ensure that the project team achieved the benefits.
- These outcomes were shared with the group and we asked if there were any issues i.e we did a sanity check on the actions.

The result, some months later, was that the Programme Director was able to announce that the pilot had achieved twice the benefits they had promised. We don't claim that using the technique can take all the credit, but it helped!

By the way, your topic does not have to be based on benefits. You might simply ask why the project failed.

ACTION

If you are involved in a project you might like to try this technique. Alternatively, if you know someone involved in a project, please pass this article on.

I have written a case study of the example given, which gives more detail on the process. If you would like a copy, please find it [here](#).

TO CLOSE

One aspect I don't like about the technique profiled here is the name. "Premortem", whilst having logic and a certain gallows humour, is a little off putting. So I have renamed it Prevaluation. If you have a better name for it, please let me know!

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