Hey Project Leaders: Failure-Proof Your Next Project in 15 Minutes

What makes a project crash and burn? Your team will tell you—just ask

I bet the team already knows why the project will fail.

Ask nicely. They'll tell you.
This could save time & money.
Or uncover new ideas & options.

All you need is a *premortem.*

"Prospective hindsight— imagining that an event has already occurred—increases the ability to correctly identify reasons for future outcomes by 30%."

–Gary Klein in HBR, 2007

First, write a simple scenario

> *It is December 2024 and our project has failed spectacularly. As the first snow falls, we gather together and wonder—what happened? Why did this fail?*

Choose a date ~2 months after the project will end.

Link that date to a major event, or to a changing season.

Then, meet with the team & present the scenario

A 15-minute meeting will do nicely.

- Ask the question.

- Give everyone 2 minutes for individual reflection.

- Provide an anonymous feedback form for their responses. Clearly state how they will be used.

Finally, host a brief discussion. Hear why the project failed

Acknowledge & thank people for their responses.

Your message is: "We're listening now, we'll problem-solve afterwards." (You must prep project sponsors & execs on this in advance.)

Close by telling people where & when you'll share themes & takeaways from the premortem.

A few actual things I've learned running premortems with teams as a weird way of saying "hello"

- This was their third attempt... but they hadn't dealt with problems that had doomed attempts one & two.

- The project was only feasible if an immutable policy was changed.

- The money had already been spent.

What will you learn when you run your first premortem?