

The Pre-Mortem: *predict, prevent, and plan... smarter*

The Pre-Mortem is a planning exercise that helps identify challenges and vulnerabilities in campaign plans by imagining the worst conceivable outcomes or failures. Meaning “before death,” this activity engages your team in collective, speculative brainstorming and reflection so that you can learn from potential difficulties and failures **before they ever happen**. Use this Pre-mortem planning worksheet near the end of a campaign planning phase but *before* you launch so that you can leverage any insights from this activity and make adjustments accordingly.

The Pre-Mortem is also an effective way to encourage feedback from diverse perspectives, build connection in your team, help you identify blind spots or biases in your plans, and most importantly *can help your future selves save time, stress, and resources*.

All you need are:

- People who are somewhat familiar with the campaign or issue (the more people who participate, the longer this will take). Try to have at least one person who **has not** worked directly on developing the campaign plan. This is a great time to enlist a trusted challenger or out-of-the-box thinker type from your network if you can.
- 1-2 hours



Pre-Mortem Guide

Set the Scene

Remind participants of the goals of the pre-mortem activity: to imagine the worst outcome and consider how they happened so that you can necessary revisions before you launch. You might not be able to adjust for every possible contingency, but you can hopefully invest and prepare for the most feasible or consequential ones.

- Review the campaign plans, targets, and goals
- Agree on a **specific date** (the day after a vote, a comment period, a national event etc.) from which you are looking back

Imagine Failure: Brainstorm

Imagine the campaign was a spectacular failure. What went wrong? Have an open brainstorm, either solo or in small groups. Capture these on a shared whiteboard or flipchart to look at together. To help this disaster brainstorm, you might try brainstorming in these arenas, which decrease in visibility and control:

Something affects your team: a sudden leave of absence; a communication breakdown during a critical moment, funding challenge, etc.

Allies, coalition partner, or key decision maker/s who were supportive fail to follow through or change positions

Previously unforeseen opposition appears on the scene and starts to outmaneuver you

Sudden change in the political context: announcement of new technology/scientific discovery; domestic or international incident

What else can your team come up with?

Review and Reflect

After your team brainstorms, choose 1-2 of the spectacular failures to discuss further. Choose one what the team feels is *most plausible* and one the team is *least prepared for or concerned about*. Try to flesh the scenario out with more detail if possible.

- What are common themes?
- Which are strategies and which tactics?
- What did this illuminate about your campaign's specific vulnerabilities?

Plan for Solutions

Ask the team to imagine those same scenarios and ask, What could we have done to prevent, mitigate, or resolve these challenges before they led to failure? What could address your greatest vulnerabilities? Look to include any necessary shifts in your plan before you launch. Try to amend for strategy first and tactics next; ex if your pre-mortem imagined a coalition partner changing their position, think about relationship building over "check ins with coalition partner" for your plan. How would ensuring an up-to-date understanding of their position, priorities, and major needs inform your dynamic with them?