

Combining Prospective Hindsight and Punctuated Equilibrium to Manage Project Risk and Improve Team Performance: The Challenge of Leadership Acceptance

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ABSTRACT

The premortem meeting is a technique used by teams to identify and mitigate risk during project initiation. This paper elaborates on the findings from a recent study that seeks to extend the benefit of the premortem by combining its driving element of “prospective hindsight” with the team development concept of “punctuated equilibrium.” Knowing that their team will undergo a midpoint transition at a project’s temporal midpoint, a project manager may seek to administer what this study has uniquely called a “midmortem” meeting. Extending the use of prospective hindsight may not only create an additional opportunity to identify risks but also provide a mechanism for the project manager to help focus the team on the remaining critical tasks. Despite the positive impact some study participants experienced in the personal application of these “common sense” techniques, they felt there was little chance that organizational leadership would practice or champion them. Feedback from the study suggests that in practice most leaders are unwilling to engage in and thus support techniques that utilize reflective action. Additional research is recommended to help examine the efficacy of this proposed risk management and team performance enhancing framework as a possible complement to existing project management processes. Research efforts that involve the real-world application of these techniques may be necessary to gain the leadership support required for organizational implementation.

Keywords: midmortem; midpoint; postmortem; premortem; technique

Introduction

An organization’s growth is intimately linked to its ability to deliver projects successfully. Projects may vary in size and scope but in their simplest form are time-limited endeavours undertaken to achieve a goal (Project Management Institute, 2017). Team members are assigned to projects so that in working together may deliver a successful outcome. They share a common goal and access to the resources thought necessary to achieve it, but projects still fail.

Identifying risk and learning from failures are crucial steps in the project management process but not all organizations possess the maturity and discipline

to maintain these best practices. Project delivery can improve with the introduction of risk management techniques that are easily understood, simple to execute and supported by leaders actively engaging in the same practices as their employees.

The Postmortem Meeting

The most well-known technique for identifying and documenting lessons learned is the “postmortem” meeting. Postmortem meetings, also called post-project or after-action reviews, are considered a best practice and administered during the project closure phase (Project Management Institute, 2009). A postmortem meeting gathers stakeholders together to look back at what has occurred to diagnose the cause of project failure. This reflective technique allows stakeholders to identify and document lessons learned as part of the cycle of continuous improvement. The recorded knowledge of these failures can then be communicated to help future project teams avoid making the same mistakes (Project Management Institute, 2009).

Postmortems may be a well-known process, but in practice, the technique is frequently avoided (Busby, 1999; Williams, 2008). Project managers recognize there is a benefit in holding a postmortem and documenting lessons learned, but the pressure to finish one project and start the next are pronounced. The work is easily set aside in the interests of time. Postmortems may also be avoided because team members worry they will become a forum where blame is assigned for task or project failure. In these cases, project managers seek to avoid postmortems to circumvent an unpleasant stakeholder confrontation.

The Premortem Meeting

Klein (2007) recognized these challenges and that the postmortem also arrived too late to benefit the project just completed. In a desire to offer an alternative to the postmortem, Klein (2007) created the “premortem” meeting. The premortem technique is the temporal opposite to the postmortem meeting. The premortem’s purpose during the project kick-off meeting is to identify and mitigate project risks during the initiation phase (Klein, 2007). The premortem allows a team to advance its project management maturity and engage in a proactive risk management practice.

Klein’s (2007) process to conduct a premortem was simple. During the kick-off meeting, a project manager asks stakeholders to imagine themselves forward in time to the end of the project. Instead of a project that has completed successfully, they are looking back at one that finished in disaster. Stakeholders keep this vision of failure firmly in mind and individually take a few minutes to write down every reason why the project failed. After this time, the team takes turns sharing their list until all members are heard and all risks recorded. (Klein, 2007)

In practice, this collaboration highlights risks commonly held between team members, sparks further elaboration on what is shared and inspires the identification of additional risks. The premortem technique allows the project manager to leave the kick-off meeting with a robust set of risks well socialized amongst the team. The premortem creates value during the initiation phase not only as a risk management technique but in

facilitating team dialogue to clarify deliverables and expectations among team members.

Prospective Hindsight: The Engine of the Premortem

The effectiveness of the premortem technique in identifying risk comes from its use of “prospective hindsight” (Klein, 2007). Prospective hindsight is the process of the individual imagining themselves forward in time and looking back at what events caused them to reach that point (Mitchell, Russo, & Pennington, 1989). In the premortem meeting, that point of time is one of failure and requires stakeholders to take a negative frame of reference as they identify project risks. Prospective hindsight allows project stakeholders to embrace whatever negatively framed scenarios their imagination creates. In this collaborative space, the premortem team members use a deductive approach to identify the reasons why the project has failed (Dickinson, 2018).

The change in temporal perspective is simple, but the results can be compelling. Although the premortem has not enjoyed extensive research, what exists has focused primarily on comparing its outcomes to the more common technique of brainstorming. Brainstorming is a dynamic and well-known ideation technique that can also be used during project kick-off meetings to identify risk (Osborn, 1953). The frame of reference a stakeholder uses when brainstorming, however, qualitatively differs from one held when conducting a premortem. In brainstorming, stakeholders are looking forward through the progression of time using an inductive approach to try and identify any issues that may arise and cause a project failure (Dickinson, 2018). Studies have shown the two techniques generate a similar volume of risks, but the quality tends to be superior with the premortem (Faily, Parkin, & Lyle, 2014; Gallop, 2017; Trotman, Simnett, & Khalifa, 2009; Venoitt, Klein, & Wiggins, 2010). The premortem can enhance project management practice, but its temporal grounding remains in the initiation phase. Kick-off meetings are only one milestone on a project timeline. There may be an additional benefit if the success of applying this technique can be replicated further into the project lifecycle.

Punctuated Equilibrium and the Midpoint Transition

The team development concept of “punctuated equilibrium” provides a second temporal window of opportunity for consideration. Punctuated equilibrium is an evolutionary biology theory that suggests that over millions of years a species may encounter brief periods of significant change (Eldredge & Gould, 1972).

The theory was applied to team development by Gersick (1988) who proposed a team settles into a period of low output or equilibrium in the first half of the project. When the team approaches the halfway point of the project, stakeholders realize how little time they now have left. Team members may experience panic as they realize their lack of progress and the amount of work remaining. The sudden awareness of the passage of time creates a punctuation point in the team’s equilibrium. The realization prompts discussions of the remaining task list and what new approaches should be taken to complete the work. Gersick

called this time in team development the “midpoint transition” (Gersick, 1988; Gersick, 1991). The implications for project managers are that they should recognize the approaching midpoint and seek ways to manage the team through this challenging time. Keeping team members focused on the critical tasks ahead will keep the project on track toward successful completion.

The Midmortem

In a recent study, it was proposed extending the use of the premortem technique further into the project lifecycle to the midpoint transition. By combining the concepts of prospective hindsight and punctuated equilibrium the study created what it uniquely called a “midmortem” meeting (Dickinson, 2018). The midmortem meeting is administered in the same manner as a premortem and provides a project team with a second opportunity to identify and mitigate project risk. Like the premortem, the permissible negative frame of the midmortem allows the discussion of risks openly, and in a collaborative setting but due to its temporal context it provides additional benefits. Project managers now have an easily administered technique that can facilitate communication during the stress of the mid-point transition. The prospective hindsight driven midmortem is a collaborative team exercise that will not only further elicit potential project risks but act as a focusing mechanism as they consider the weight of the remaining tasks. This paper explores specific participant feedback from the study regarding how the premortem and midmortem may become labelled “common sense” and how this may contribute with other factors to the challenge of gaining the executive sponsorship required for organizational deployment.

Methods

The exploratory research on which this paper draws its findings brought the concepts of prospective hindsight and punctuated equilibrium together in practice for the first time. A second outcome the study sought was to provide all potential participants access to a set of tools they could use in their project management practice (Dickinson, 2018). In order to accomplish these dual outcomes an Action Research approach was used (Bradbury-Huang, 2010; Smith, 2017).

The steps of plan-act-observe-reflect offered a method to introduce the techniques to potential participants, demonstrate where they may be of benefit, and elicit their feedback for improvement in future iterations.

The pool of potential participants for this study came from a graduate level business class held in the Fall of 2017 at a small Canadian university. The class was divided between those just beginning their Executive Master of Business Administration (EMBA) (N=16) and those midway through the program (N=14). During one class, the students were provided with an education session that reviewed the concepts of prospective hindsight and punctuated equilibrium as well as the premortem and midmortem meetings. The potential study participants were then led through an actual application of the premortem and midmortem techniques on something that would have meaning for them, the

completion of their EMBA program.

The split between the two years allowed the education and execution of both techniques to run simultaneously. The premortem was completed by the EMBA students who had just entered their first year while the midmortem completed by students beginning their second-year. After the exercise, potential participants were informed that the study would include one-on-one interviews completing an anonymous online questionnaire and provided an opportunity to volunteer.

In the class of 30 students, 14 (47%) volunteered to participate in the study. Participants were asked to reflect on the experiences of using the premortem and midmortem from their earlier education session as well as look for opportunities to use these techniques in their own personal and professional practice. Approximately 60 different concepts were identified from the interview and questionnaire text. These concepts were subsequently grouped into 18 thematic areas (Dickinson, 2018).

Results

Two connected themes emerged from participants feedback and explored by this paper. These were that the premortem and midmortem techniques were common sense practices and how that finding may relate to gaining the necessary executive acceptance required for their adoption.

Common Sense as a Problem

Since its introduction by Klein (2007), the premortem has generated some measure of online recognition (Google.com returned 405,000 search results for “premortem,” Feb 15th, 2019). Despite this, it has not yet had time to rise to the level of common cultural understanding enjoyed by techniques like brainstorming.

It is perhaps not surprising then that study participants did not express a previous familiarity with the premortem technique nor the underpinning concepts of prospective hindsight and punctuated equilibrium. Despite the lack of familiarity, participants feedback indicated that these newly discovered techniques were “common sense.” Even when participants did not explicitly label the techniques as common sense their language identified that they were executing something intuitive and straightforward. Several participants even misidentified what they did in the premortem and midmortem as being the more familiar team activity of brainstorming.

Creating an association with brainstorming provided the participants with an easy way to describe the activity, but their feedback indicates it may, in turn, impede their adoption. Introducing these techniques as brainstorming and common sense may cause an unintentional anchor point, with potential executive sponsors. One study participant observed that executives might see it as something people are already doing. In equating the two techniques to common sense and brainstorming it may lead these crucial supporters to

discount the value of the premortem and midmortem meetings. Educating potential practitioners on the qualitative differentiators between brainstorming and the two prospective hindsight driven methods may prove to be a key element in providing clarity and encouraging acceptance.

The Leadership Barrier

Feedback from participants also revealed a cynical view of the skill depth of their leaders. One participant observed, “I don’t really see the upper management putting much of an emphasis on reflection” [ID01]. Participants believed executives would instead view these techniques as a waste of valuable time. Another participant described the executive mentality toward risk management as, “once a problem comes up, we will deal with it” [ID04]. Executives have a bias toward action and are less interested in imagination and more interested in time spent on tasks they see advancing the project. While this may represent a limited assessment of senior management capabilities, it was a reality that participants believed may negatively impact the acceptance of these two techniques.

The road to acceptance may be further complicated given practitioners must embrace and use a negative frame of reference through the course of the exercise. Stakeholders are asked to construct a future where the project has failed. In their leadership roles, executive sponsors may prefer to express positivity and confidence during project kick-off and subsequent status update meetings. As one participant suggested, temporarily embracing the negative frame may not come naturally for the “non-academia world...like managers-practicers” [ID04]. In order to overcome this barrier, it will be essential to provide them with insight into why the negative frame of the premortem and midmortem is useful and beneficial.

The participants' feedback also echoes one of the reasons why Klein (2007) created the premortem as a response to the postmortem. Stakeholders without a safe space to express unpopular ideas will not identify risk for fear of not being seen as a “team player.” If executives promote only positive sentiments in a project meeting and actively discourage negative ones, stakeholders may withhold feedback. Repressing team communication will not stop employee conversation regarding project risk. Instead of productive discussions happening out in the open among the project team, it becomes complaints voiced behind closed doors and in hallway conversations. There is a missed opportunity as these risks remain hidden from the eyes of the project manager robbing them of the ability to avoid or mitigate an issue that could improve project delivery.

The lack of open team communication on project risks may also result in overconfidence in the project plan. The premortem and its required adoption of a negative frame have been considered an effective way to reduce plan overconfidence in the initiation phase (Kahneman & Klein, 2009). The midpoint transition of a project offers similar conditions. During the midpoint transition, the team is re-evaluating the remaining workload and is adjusting their plan. The negative frame of the midmortem meeting can provide

another check on potential plan overconfidence while creating a forum for continued team dialogue. The discussion of the remaining deliverables during the midpoint transition happens at a time when promoting clarity of vision among the team is required.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the practicality of combining the two concepts of prospective hindsight and punctuated equilibrium into the midmortem and explored how it and the premortem techniques may experience difficulties achieving the critical milestone of executive sponsorship. In order to achieve successful deployment, leaders must not only introduce and champion the premortem and midmortem but be visible practitioners of these techniques as well. Implementation of corporate initiatives are more successful when leadership has not only endorsed the process but visibly adopted the same procedures for themselves (Rodgers & Hunter, 1991). In common sense parlance when it is time to engage in the premortem and midmortem meetings organizational leadership must not just “talk the talk” they must also “walk the walk.”

Overcoming the executive support barrier lies in providing clear and compelling education when introducing the techniques — explaining how the premortem and midmortem are not brainstorming and what makes them qualitatively different and more effective. How they can help reduce plan overconfidence and increase communication between team members. Discussing with executives why they need to suspend, but not abandon, their inclinations to promote positivity when the premortem and midmortem meetings occur.

These conversations will help potential executive sponsors understand how these techniques may increase the chances of project success and bolster organizational project management maturity. Education is vital for achieving organizational acceptance, but for broader use and growth of these techniques, it will not be enough. Expanded research efforts on the premortem and the newly constructed midmortem are required to provide empirical evidence that supports, contradicts, or expands upon these initial findings.

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