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Sent:	Wednesday, August 01, 2012 12:35 PM
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Subject:	August FOCUS

Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

August 2012

Project Pre-Mortems

Why wait until the patient dies to see what went wrong?

Well, an autopsy can be a tricky proposition with a living person, but a project pre-mortem is a nifty way to spot oversights in projects. Here's why: Once people develop a plan they can become overconfident, especially if they're inexperienced. Project pre-mortems challenge our thinking because they begin with the proposition that the project *failed*.

Carrying out a pre-mortem is simple. Ask the project manager, or team, to imagine a scenario after the 50% complete milepost that will lead to failure, and then write the project post-mortem from a future point of view. You are challenging the person/team to be creative *and competent* by showing how their plans could fail.

The idea here is to break the emotional attachment we have for our own work and look at our assumptions from a new perspective, spotting potential causes of breakdown. Done well, this process can lead to improving internal procedures. For

example, "*If that could happen, then what about this? We've never really considered how a delay there could cascade through the entire company, and even affect other operations. Or what if bad weather delayed material or our ability to complete a critical task?*"

The leader's role here is to *anticipate resistance* and focus on first selling the benefits of the pre-mortem idea. After that, as pre-mortems become more commonplace, the leader should boost the momentum by adding an element of recognition and fun to the activity. Golden statuettes, anyone?

Tom Wagner

Good leaders help followers learn to be *Pre*-active

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