Pre-mortem

Imagine the project has already failed six months from now, then work backwards to surface the risks people privately worry about but never say. Turns vague unease into specific, nameable failure modes and agrees the safeguards worth building now.

45 minutes
Strategy
Intermediate

H HOW TO RUN

1 Set the Scene — 5 min

Imagine it's six months from now and this project has failed completely — not 'had some issues,' but genuinely failed. Sit with that. Don't soften it.

2 Silent Failure Generation — 10 min

On their own, each person writes every reason it failed, one per sticky note. Be specific — 'engineering and design never agreed on what done meant,' not 'poor communication.'

3 Share and Cluster — 15 min

Post failures on the wall, reading each aloud. Group related notes into themes. Don't debate yet — just get everything visible.

4 Prioritize the Real Threats — 8 min

Each person gets three dots. Vote on the failures that are both most likely and most damaging.

5 Name the Safeguards — 7 min

For the top three risks, write one concrete safeguard each — what you'll do now to prevent it, and who owns it.

KEY TIP

Make the failure total — the power of a pre-mortem comes from imagining complete collapse, not 'minor setbacks.' If the most senior person speaks first, everyone calibrates to them, so have leaders write silently and share last; otherwise you get the boss's pre-mortem, not the team's.

O OBJECTIVES

- Participants will: Surface the risks people privately worry about but rarely say out loud
- Turn vague unease into specific, nameable failure modes
- Agree on the safeguards worth building now

M MATERIALS

- ☐ Sticky notes (two colors: one for failures, one for safeguards)
- ☐ Markers for everyone
- ☐ Large wall space or whiteboard
- ☐ Dot stickers for prioritizing the top risks
- ☐ A clearly stated plan, project, or decision to stress-test

P PARTICIPANTS

5 to 12 people

F FACILITATOR NOTES

REMEMBER

- Push for specificity: 'stakeholder misalignment' is a polite way to dodge the real problem — which stakeholders, disagreeing about what?
- You'll always surface more risks than you can address; pick the top three and give each an owner.
- A pre-mortem that ends with thirty unowned worries is just anxiety with sticky notes; three owned safeguards is a result.
- Great for project kickoffs, major launches, and any high-stakes plan before you commit.