

Imagine it failed. Work backwards to find out why.

Background

Gary Klein · Harvard Business Review · 2007

A Pre-Mortem runs the failure scenario before launch. You assume the project has already failed — catastrophically — and work backwards to name the causes. This bypasses the optimism bias that kills most risk assessments.

How to Run This

- 1 State clearly what you're about to commit to or launch.
- 2 Assume it's 12 months from now and the project has failed badly.
- 3 Fill in each risk category — what caused this type of failure?
- 4 Score each risk: High/Medium/Low for likelihood and consequence.
- 5 Identify your top 2 mitigations — specific actions, not general caution.

Facilitator Tips

Common mistake

Rating every risk as Medium/Medium. Force at least one High/High rating.

What good looks like

A risk that someone has been thinking about privately but hasn't said out loud.

When to move on

When you have a clear Biggest Risk with a specific mitigation plan.

About Wade Institute

Wade Institute of Entrepreneurship is Australia's leading centre for entrepreneurial education, based at the University of Melbourne. The Studio is Wade's free, AI-powered innovation workshop platform — making 24 structured frameworks available to anyone, each one facilitated by Pete, an AI coach trained in Wade's methodology.

Try this interactively in The Studio

Pete will guide you through the failure scenario — asking the questions that surface the risks people usually leave unsaid. You'll leave with a clear risk map and a session report.

studio.wadeinstitute.org.au →

1 THE IDEA / PROJECT / DECISION

Assume it has failed spectacularly. Now work backwards.

2 MARKET RISK

No one wants it. Wrong audience. Bad timing.

3 PRODUCT RISK

It doesn't work. Wrong features. Too complex.

4 EXECUTION RISK

Can't ship. Wrong priorities. Too slow.

5 TEAM / PEOPLE RISK

Missing skills. Misalignment. Burnout.

6 COMPETITION RISK

Someone else does it better, faster, cheaper.

7 TIMING RISK

Too early. Too late. Wrong sequence.

8 BIGGEST RISK

Which single risk is most likely to kill this?

9 MITIGATIONS

What will you do in the next 48 hours to reduce the top risks?