

The Pre-Mortem Assessment

Setting the Stage

Before your paper or briefing is ready for “prime time” or when you are about two-thirds of the way to completion ask yourself the following questions:

“What if my main conclusion or key judgment turns out to be flat wrong?”
“How did this happen?”

The Process

The process takes the author (or the team) through an ordered set of questions, asking if they have examined:

- Their **key assumptions**. Could any of these be unsubstantiated? Do some assumptions need to be caveated? If some are not valid, how much impact could this have on the analysis?
- The **critical evidence** that provides the foundation for the argument. Is the analysis based on any critical item of information? On a particular stream of reporting? If any of this evidence or the source of the reporting turned out to be incorrect, how much impact would this have on the analysis?
- The presence of **contradictory information**. Was any information overlooked that is inconsistent with our lead
- The potential for **deception**. Does anyone have motive, opportunity, and means to deceive you?
- The completeness of the data/information. Are there any major information gaps where one normally would expect to have information, suggesting the possibility of denial? Did the **absence of information** influence how the team arrived at its key judgment?
- The presence of **common analytic pitfalls** such as confirmation bias, “satisficing,” and historical analogy.

The Output

Based on the answers to the themes of inquiry outlined above, the team lists the potential deficiencies in the argument in order of potential impact on the analysis. The team then employs a tool or technique to address the vulnerability. For example, the analyst would be encouraged to employ a Key Assumptions Check, Analysis of Competing Hypotheses, Deception Detection checklists, or another critical thinking tool or technique.

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