



Stanford eCorner

Predict Failures Before Beginning

Astro Teller, X

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/4212/Predict-Failures-Before-Beginning>

Alphabet's Astro Teller describes the "pre-mortem," an exercise used by organizations to identify possible pitfalls it may encounter. Teams imagine in great detail that a project has launched and then predict what could go wrong. Depending on the likelihood and seriousness of the problem, the organization can take proactive steps to prevent it from happening.



Transcript

- We're doing premortems. A premortem is nothing other than trying to talk about the learning moment of a failure before we actually have the failure. We're so eager to learn from our failures, we don't want to wait till the failure happens to learn from it. It introduces a little bit of like one of those time machine movie questions where like if you actually, then address it, and then failure doesn't happen, maybe it never would've happened in the first place. So you don't get a good control experiment for these things, but actually saying to everybody in the organization, let's talk about what's wrong with us, not in a SurveyMonkey kind of way, but like let's really talk about it. Tell me what you think is the biggest risk for our organization overall or for Project Loon or for the self-driving car project. Tell me why we're gonna fail. When we fail three years from now, what will that be in your opinion? Write it down, put it up there with your name on it, which is a little bit scary because some people can feel thrown under the bus when you actually call out these Achilles' heels that you see or that you think might be there. Then have a mechanism, which we do, so you can just vote these up or down, which causes the things that more people think are actual risks. Even if you didn't write it down, you'd be like, yeah I agree, I agree, I agree with these and not with those, no I don't think those problems.

It causes the stuff that's probably the biggest risks to rise to the surface and then there's commenting mechanisms so people can actually discuss it. Only if you get thrown under the bus, you say that, you know, Project Loon is gonna have some problem and you say what it is, and you work on Project Loon, and then people go after you about it. If our culture isn't one that rewards you for doing that, that's the last time you're gonna do that. So making a mechanism like that actually isn't the hard part. I think it's a good thing, it's working for us. But the hard part is relentlessly and repeatedly chasing down those moments where it's not working. He needs a hug if he said something brave on that site. I mean a physical hug, an actual hug or a high-five or whatever. Then if he actually gets a hard time from someone for having written that down, what are we all gonna do to defend him, not just because he's right, he's probably wrong. Well like we don't know.

There's a lot of smart people on the Loon project. I'm sure they've already thought of it, but thank you for saying that whether or not you're right.