It Already Failed

Facilitator guide

Your job: take a plan the team is about to commit to, and run a failure autopsy on it before it happens. Set the frame that it has already failed, get every suspected cause up on a wall, keep only what the team could have acted on, force it to the top five, and send each one out with a preventive move and an owner. You run it from a wall or whiteboard with cards, with a team, in 20–30 minutes.

The one line you must hold: run it in the past tense — "it failed, explain why" — never "let's brainstorm risks". The past tense is the mechanism: it removes the need to defend the plan, so people investigate instead. **We are far better at explaining failure than predicting it.**

· WHEN DO I USE THIS?

Use this when

GOOD FIT

A team about to commit to a plan with real stakes — a sprint, release, migration or launch — where "what could go wrong?" keeps getting polite, shallow answers and you sense unspoken doubts in the room.

WRONG TOOL

The risks are already surfaced and you must choose which to accept › Risk Trade-off Lab. A setback is unfolding right now › Delivery Recovery Path. A single go/no-go decision at the gate › Go/No-Go Card.

The one test before you start: is the plan still uncommitted — is there still time to act on what you find? If yes, run it now, while prevention is cheap. If the plan is already running, this is the wrong moment.

PART 1 BEFORE THE ACTIVITY

get ready

1 · WHAT IS MY JOB HERE?

Your job and the one idea

You run this to one outcome: the team commits with its top failure modes named and each one owned as a preventive move — not a list of worries. Brief the team in 2–3 minutes in your own words; don't assume anyone read the app page. A twenty-second open works: "We're not trying to predict failure today. We're assuming the plan has already failed and explaining why — because people explain failures far better than they predict them."

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THE ONE IDEA

Once a team has invested in a plan, it stops evaluating it and starts defending it — so the doubts people privately hold go unsaid until the post-mortem. Assume the plan has already failed and those same people explain freely what sank it. Your job is to protect that past-tense frame and turn what surfaces into owned prevention.

2 · WHAT DO I NEED?

What you'll need

What	Why it's there
One real plan	A plan the team is about to commit to, with genuine stakes — a sprint, release, migration or launch. Bring a live one.
Cause cards + a wall	One blank card or sticky note per failure cause, and a whiteboard, wall or large flip chart to build them into a visible wall, then thin to five.
A marker each	One per person, so everyone writes causes at once and the wall fills fast.

Constraints · Manage Risks · 20–30 minutes · a team, one facilitator. The time is indicative and will depend on the size of the plan and the team.

Protect the wall — it is the mechanism. Don't rush it, don't optimise it, don't skip it. The wall only works if it gets full: only after the room sees fifty ways to fail does "we can only protect against five" land emotionally. A short wall is a weak run.

PART 2 DURING THE ACTIVITY

run it

Before you begin — 30-second check

- ✓ There's one real plan, still uncommitted, with time to act
- ✓ The people who own the plan are in the room
- ✓ Cards, markers and a wall are ready
- ✓ You're ready to hold the past tense and protect the wall

3 · HOW DO I RUN IT?

Run sheet

Brief the team (2–3 min), then run these in order. Protect Step 2 (the wall) and Step 5 (owned prevention) — a full wall thinned to five owned moves beats a tidy list no one owns.

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1. Set the frame	**2 min**	*Facilitator: create the fictional world. "It's six months on. This plan failed. We're not asking if — we're explaining why."* Write the failed plan at the top of the wall. Never "let's brainstorm risks".
2. Fill the wall	**8–10 min**	*Team — everybody writes, including you: causes of the failure, one per card, especially what somebody already suspected but nobody acted on.* Keep writing until you genuinely can't think of another plausible cause. Work silently; discussion comes later. Every card goes up as soon as it's written. Don't sort, don't debate — fill the wall.
3. Apply the actionability filter	**4–5 min**	*Facilitator, ask of each card:* ***"could we reasonably have acted on this before we started?"*** If yes, it stays. If it's vague blame or unactionable, it comes off the wall.
4. Force it to the top five	**4–5 min**	*Team: converge to the five failure modes that matter most.* If two cards describe the same failure, merge them first. Then argue, group, cut. The cutting is what makes them a priority.
5. Prevention + owner	**4–5 min**	*Team: for each of the five, write the prevention, not the problem — a real action, with an owner and a time.* "Build an API spike before Sprint 2", not "API instability". Leave only once every one is owned.

What success looks like: the room goes quiet as the wall fills, then someone names the doubt they'd been holding — "honestly, I've been worried about the data migration all along". That's the tool doing its job: the concern was already in the room; the past tense gave it permission to be said.

When to step in — and when to stay out · a principle, not a step

STEP IN

The room slips into future tense ("might", "could") → reset to "it failed — why?"

People start sorting into categories → stop them; fill the wall first.

A card is vague blame → apply the actionability filter out loud.

Twenty risks, all "equal" → force the cut to five.

STAY OUT

The wall gets uncomfortably long → good; that's the accumulation working.

A hard doubt gets named → let it land; don't rush to reassure.

The cut to five gets heated → that's the priority forming.

Silence while people write → leave it; silent writing prevents anchoring.

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The clearest tell it's time to step in: the team names five risks but wants to stop there, satisfied. Step in: "a risk with no preventive move is just a worry — what's the move, and who owns it?" The prevention, owned, is the output; the list alone is not.

PART 3 AFTER THE ACTIVITY

make it stick

4 · WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY?

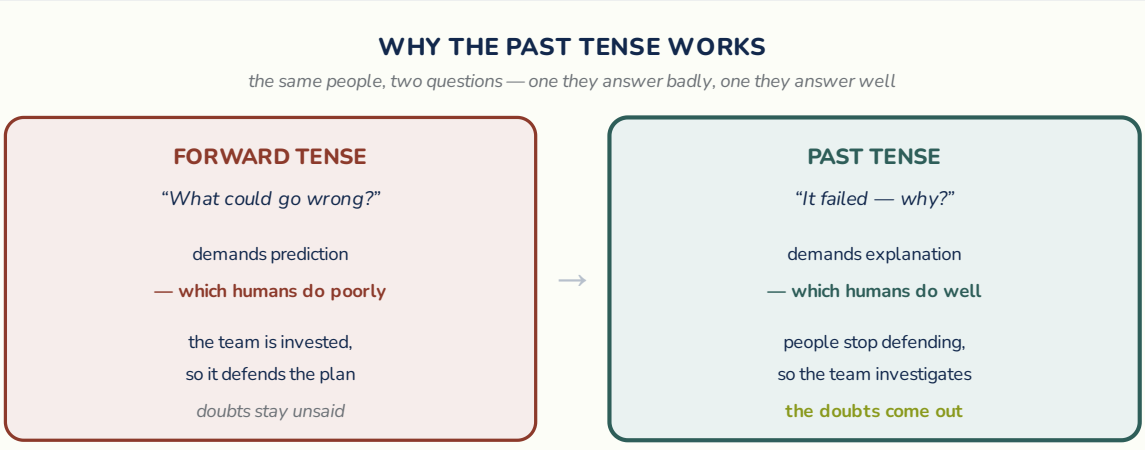
What participants say — and your move

What they say	Your response
"This feels negative — why dwell on failure?"	"We're not predicting failure, we're preventing it. Naming a risk now is what stops it becoming the post-mortem."
"Aren't we just guessing what'll go wrong?"	"In the past tense we're not — we're explaining, which we do far better than predicting. That's why the answers come richer."
"Can't we keep all the risks?"	"Twenty equal risks is no output. Forcing five is what tells us where to actually spend prevention."
"Isn't naming this risk blaming someone?"	"We're examining a fictional failure, not a person. The filter keeps causes we could act on, not blame."

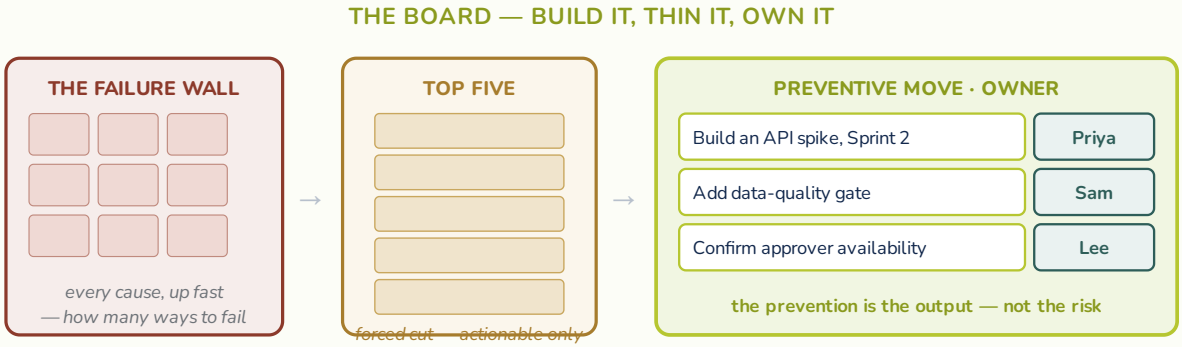
5 · WHY DOES THIS WORK?

Why it works

Once people invest in a plan they become its advocates, not its evaluators — so a forward-tense "what could go wrong?" feels like an attack on something they own, and suspected risks stay silent. The past tense removes the need to defend: you're examining a fictional failure, not a colleague's plan. And the deeper reason — forward tense demands prediction, which humans do poorly; past tense demands explanation, which we do well.



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The wall is the point: fifty ways to fail make "protect against five" land.

Before you close the session

- ✓ The wall was built full before anything was sorted or cut
- ✓ Every surviving cause passed the actionability filter
- ✓ The team forced it to five — not twenty, not ten
- ✓ Each of the five has a preventive move and a named owner

6 · HOW DO I MAKE THIS STICK?

Take it back to work

THE HABIT

Before committing to any plan, ask: "imagine this already failed — what sank it, and what would we do now to prevent it?"

The past-tense question becomes a reflex the team reaches for at every commitment point. Teams that run this a few times stop waiting for the post-mortem to hear "I had a bad feeling about that" — they surface it before they commit.

Appendix · Reference

You should not need this while you run the activity. Read it before, or use it if a run goes sideways.

7 · A WORKED RUN

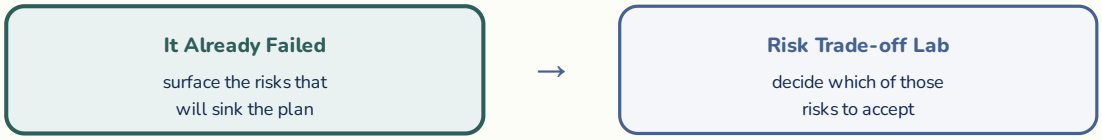
Watch the doubt come out of the room

Tomorrow the team is committing to migrate forty enterprise customers in one sprint.

Set the frame: "Eight weeks later. The migration failed and we rolled back. Explain why." **Build the wall:** in silence, forty-odd cards go up — and one reads "we never tested the legacy data at volume", written by the engineer who'd worried about it for weeks. **Filter and force:** vague blame comes off; the room cuts to five. **Own it:** each of the five gets a preventive move and an owner.

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WHERE THIS SITS — SURFACE, THEN DECIDE



This tool finds what could sink you. The Lab decides which risks you live with.

What the facilitator did: held the past tense when the room drifted to "might", protected the silent wall so the data-quality doubt got written instead of swallowed, then drove past the five-risk list to five owned preventive moves — "test legacy data at volume, owner: Sam, before sprint start". The team committed with its worst risk already being prevented, not discovered later in a post-mortem.

8 · WHAT IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG?

Common mistakes and edge cases

What happens	What to do
The room keeps slipping to future tense	Reset hard to the past tense every time: "it already failed — we're explaining, not predicting". The frame is the mechanism; protect it.
People sort into categories as they write	Stop it. Fill the wall organically first; patterns can emerge after. Imposed categories make people channel instead of think.
The wall is thin — few causes	Push the frame harder ("it failed *badly* — what's the embarrassing reason?"), and protect silence so the quiet doubts get written.
Cards are vague blame ("QA wasn't committed")	Apply the actionability filter: could we have acted on it before starting? If not, off the wall. Keep causes, not blame.
The team won't cut below ten	Force the scarcity: "which five would you spend prevention on?" Twenty equal risks is no output.
Five risks, no owners	The run failed regardless of insight. A risk with no owned preventive move is just a worry — require the move and the owner.
"This risk isn't ours to fix"	Then the preventive move is to escalate or flag it — still a move, still owned. Unownable risks don't just get parked.

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9 · WHERE DOES THIS FIT?

Where this sits in the Gym

The real need	Use this
Surface the risks that will actually sink a plan, before committing	**This tool — It Already Failed.** Assume it failed, explain why, own the prevention.
Decide which of the surfaced risks to accept	**Risk Trade-off Lab** — the natural next step: surface here, then choose what to live with.
Steady a setback that is unfolding right now	**Delivery Recovery Path** — stabilise the live incident, find the next move.
Make a single go/no-go call at the gate	**Go/No-Go Card** — the commit decision itself, once the risks are known.

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