

Who Shot Ya? A Better Post-Mortem for Agencies

Including templates you're welcome to steal — because process, not outcome, is what great agencies are rewarded for doing.

Most observers would suggest that agencies are rewarded for winning awards for their creativity. But agencies aren't rewarded for winning awards. Agencies are rewarded for making the best decisions about being creative. The point is the way an agency organizes itself to reliably and consistently produce great creative. Process, not outcome, is what great agencies are rewarded for doing.

Actually, Let's Not Call Them Postmortems

A postmortem is the examination of a body to determine the cause of death. The very name is quite grim. How about something more forgiving? More encompassing? More appreciative? Something that doesn't assume an error has been made. How about we use the term 'retrospective'?

Why Retrospectives Are a Form of Double-Loop Learning

The first time you make a decision you are engaging in single-loop learning. You do a thing, and you're rewarded for it or you're not. But if you question why or how you did a thing — if you honestly self-assess your assumptions and methods of action — you shift into double-loop learning.

That's what a retrospective is. It's not just acknowledging what went wrong or right. It's questioning the assumptions that led you to that result. By reframing postmortems as retrospectives, you open the possibility of using them at any opportune moment.

Retrospectives Are Difficult Because They Hurt

Reflection takes time. And because the future is not visible today, slowing down today to go faster at an indeterminate future point seems like a bad gamble. Reflection is also potentially embarrassing. People resist learning from fear of being seen as incompetent.

That's why successful retrospectives establish a no-blame atmosphere of learning. They collect and analyze data. They ask what conclusions we can draw from our experience. They don't blame individuals. Instead: they improve the processes that individuals use, which in turn allows the individuals to be more successful.