Your Guide to Getting Better

Retrospectives
OVERVIEW
Retrospectives are a communication forum in which teams come together to celebrate team successes and to reflect on what can be improved. Participants have a unified objective to develop a plan they can use to apply lessons learned going forward.

Unlike traditional “lessons learned” meetings that are typically held at the conclusion of an effort, true retrospectives are done more regularly using an iterative approach in order to ensure value is realized throughout the process.

PRIMARY ACTIVITIES
1. Determine the Cadence
2. Identify a Facilitator
3. Select the Approach
4. Prepare for the Retrospective
5. Conduct Session
6. Adjust Behaviors for Improvement

KEY POINTS
• Conduct retrospectives early and often
• Focus only on what is within the team’s control
• Reflect on previous commitments to improve
• Keep a backlog of improvement items
• Ensure open & honest communication
• Seek authentic commitment to adjust behaviors

INSPIRATION
The Retrospective Prime Directive
Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.²

CONSIDER RETROSPECTIVES FOR
Agile Teams
Program Teams
COEs
Business Units
PHILOSOPHY

Why are retrospectives important?

Retrospectives are nothing more than a feedback loop that provides insight into the operations of a team. Organizations leveraging Agile practices directly relate the ceremony of retrospectives to the 12th Agile principle, “At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.”

The discipline to inspect and adapt is the cornerstone of high performing teams, and that’s not a surprising concept since research has shown that three factors have an overwhelming influence on motivation, quality of work, and team morale: 1) Autonomy 2) Mastery 3) Purpose. A team’s act of reflection aligns with the need for mastery, the innate desire for people to become better at the things they do and ultimately plays into the psychology of why teams are so effective for getting work done. When teams learn and improve together, the sum of their efforts drives them to ‘win,’ and in order to continue winning they must practice and adjust their behavior as they mature.

The key with retrospectives is the idea of change, because without true and meaningful change resulting from the retrospective, all you’re left with is talk. In fact, all you’re left with is insanity, because as the Einstein quote tell us Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Teams, individuals, and organizations that truly want to improve must indeed change. The discipline of retrospectives offers the opportunity for the reflection and review necessary in order for the resulting changes to have positive impact over time.

Remember that retrospectives are simply a tool: when misused or worse, not used at all, the value that the tool has to offer is lost. When used in the appropriate context with the right participants and in the right environment, however, you’ll find the time invested in this ritual returns dividends not only in tangible team behaviors, but also in more intangible team dynamics and interactions and yield bountiful results in the quality of the work the team does.

Substance and Spirit

Substance refers to the actual content discussed during the retrospective. Anything that affects how the team gets its work done is fair game for discussion. Thorough retrospectives will explore and scrutinize a team’s processes, practices, communication, environment, artifacts, tools, etc. This is normally done by discussing three key questions:

1. What went well?
2. What did not go well?
3. What can we commit to improving?

Many approaches can be used to explore these topics and groups that fail to leverage different techniques may find that discussions fall short and are less meaningful. It is important to remember that the substance of retrospectives should be constrained to topics that are within the team’s realm of influence. While it is appropriate to raise and escalate outside impediments and obstacles the team encounters, the true focus should be on the processes and practices that the retrospectives participants are empowered to modify and adapt in order to improve.

The substance of retrospectives is often general in nature,
where participants are reflecting on the past iteration, or some other period of time (e.g. the last release). Don’t forget that the discussion during retrospectives could be focused on a specific topic or issue that the team is interested in exploring (e.g. technical excellence, backlog refinement, team dynamics).

Spirit refers to the attitude and mindset that participants have for the discussion. Retrospectives are not for superficial discussion of things that teams did well and did not do well. They are opportunities to have rich and meaningful discussion. Also, retrospectives are not post mortems, because post mortems typically focus on what went wrong and who was to blame; whereas, retrospectives are a look back holistically and do not assign blame, but focus on how the team can improve as a whole. Look to the Retrospective Prime Directive for guidance on the spirit of discussion.

BEFORE THE RETROSPECTIVE

Who should participate?

Retrospective participants are driven by the goal and focus of the retrospective, and can range in size from a few people in a project or Agile team to an entire department or business unit. Large groups may be broken into smaller groups that will participate in activities separately, then share and discuss their results with the larger group. In general, participation should be limited to the core team of individuals who have direct impact on the outcome of the work. This smaller, more focused group is naturally closer to the work and more capable of evaluating what has happened. They are also more likely to freely reflect on the work they have done together and how they can improve. Unless a team member’s supervisor/boss/manager directly contributed to the work being evaluated in more than an advisory capacity, it is best to exclude them from direct participation in the retrospective.

While participation is generally limited to those directly involved in the work being evaluated, no group operates in a vacuum within an organization. It’s a good idea to occasionally include individuals who were tangentially involved in the process to evaluate inter-group interactions. For example, if a team is working on a project that results in a marketing piece that will be done by the marketing group and reviewed by legal or compliance team, those involved from the marketing, legal, and compliance teams should periodically be included in a broader retrospective to evaluate the communication and interactions among the groups. Richness in the discussion will emerge when the cross-functional disciplines come together and provide unique perspectives and insights on the practices and processes used by the group. Multiple points of view are critical in affecting organizational change.

Retrospective Prime Directive

Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand. 2
Preparing for the Retrospective

A successful retrospective requires that the facilitator dedicate some time beforehand to create a plan, keeping in mind the wisdom of Dwight D. Eisenhower, who said, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” It is the act of planning, not the plan, that sets teams up for success.

WHEN PREPARING CONSIDER

- Do you have confirmation that the participants are available?
- Is the space we are using for the session suitable for the facilitation approach?
- Do you have enough materials for everyone?
- Are you prepared to articulate the purpose and intent of the session?
- How will you elicit thoughtful ideas from the group, and how will you ensure that everyone in the group is able to contribute thoughtful ideas?
- What activities will help guide the group towards insights based on the outcomes of any brainstorming or ideation activities?
- In relative terms, how much time should the group spend on each activity?
- Are there any issues that you must find a way to introduce into the conversation if the group doesn’t naturally bring them up?
- How will you capture the team’s key learnings in a way that can be shared up, down, and across the organization such that each constituency can derive value from those data?

While an agenda is important, a formal agenda that dictates exactly how much time will be spent on any given activity could restrict valuable learning by arbitrarily cutting off important conversation. Instead of providing a formal agenda with specific start and stop times for each activity, consider posting a large agenda in a conspicuous location with rough durations to be spent on each activity to let participants quickly ascertain the relative duration.

Providing relative times helps participants understand the relative level of detail and thought expected for each activity and allows time for deeper more meaningful discussions that may spontaneously arise in order to avoid rushing people through topics and activities in order to finish everything planned. Remember: when allocating time, always expect the unexpected.

Establish a Safe Environment

Retrospectives are intended to be catalysts for change, and change is not always easy. Teams often encounter a challenge when there is a conflict with the desire to preserve the status quo versus embracing the exploration and reflection associated with finding ways to improve. As the Prime Directive indicates, the spirit of retrospectives truly believes that every team member did their best, and if participants stray from that position then a safe environment seeking constructive feedback can quickly become a forum for personal attacks and finger-pointing. This is further complicated when the team considers changes to processes and practices that are tied to how a subset of participants derive their social capital within the workplace.

In order to maintain a safe environment, encourage participants to use “I-statements.” This will help with diffusing the feeling of blame and accusations. When participants talk about someone (e.g. Shawn doesn’t think the Definition of Done matters), it can create a hostile environment; however, rephrasing the statement (e.g. It makes me frustrated when Shawn skips critical items during task planning that are essential for us delivering in alignment with our Definition of Done) makes it a less threatening statement and relates it back to how it impacts the team.
Even when you have done all you can to ensure a safe environment, people will invariably have personal conflicts that can undermine the safe environment you’re trying to establish and nurture. Some personal conflicts will be fleeting and won’t impact the team; whereas, other personal conflicts will become toxic to the team and the conversation. If creating a safe environment seems to be a challenge, there may be an absence of trust among participants. A lack of mutual trust and respect is a base dysfunction many teams encounter and it will be necessary to move past it in order to conduct a thoughtful retrospective.²

As a general rule, if the conflict is not impacting how the team interacts or the team’s productivity, then it may be a good idea to ‘Set the Stage’ using a couple of activities that help focus attention on personal interactions.⁴ There are many to choose from and they will ensure individuals involved in the conflict are reflecting on how they will interact in the session. However, if a personal conflict is impacting the team or, worse, has infected the team and created a noticeable rift or “us vs. them” mentality among participants, it may be necessary to address the issue before conducting a retrospective. It is critical to be aware of the team dynamics and avoid holding a retrospective that you know will deteriorate into a battle because of personal conflict. Deal with those issues in private and make sure those involved are on a path to reconciliation before holding a retrospective.

**DURING THE RETROSPECTIVE**

*Facilitation versus Participation*

True facilitators are only that: facilitators. They do not participate or add content to the substance of the discussion; instead, they offer structure and ground rules in order to help ensure the session is effective. The question to explore is whether or not the retrospective facilitator must be independent. Individuals who have been actively engaged in the work the participants are reflecting on can unintentionally bias the outcomes of the discussions, so it is best to have a truly neutral facilitator for a retrospective, which is not always a feasible option for groups.¹

Non-independent facilitators must be aware that they will encounter a conflict of interest. In order to help dismiss any concerns participants have, you should disclose the predicament when setting the stage for the retrospective. Reinforce that you will do your best to separate your opinions from the facilitation, and encourage participants to speak up if they feel you have crossed the line. Most importantly, follow the 5 phases of a retrospective: doing so allows the team to follow a logical progression towards a common understanding of the situation at hand prior to jumping into how to solve a problem, and will help you avoid jumping straight to a solution or imposing your ideas on the team.

**FIVE PHASES OF A RETROSPECTIVE**⁴

1. Set the stage
2. Gather data
3. Generate insights
4. Decide what to do
5. Close the retrospective
much as possible. As opposed to taking up sticky notes or index cards from a brainstorming session on a topic and then placing them on the board yourself, have participants place them on the wall themselves or have someone volunteer to collect them all and read them out as they are placed on the wall. This allows for you to step back and observe team dynamics, gain insights, and ask questions that highlight topics or themes they may have missed. It also creates more ownership of the content among the participants as opposed to creating the perception that the facilitator is the one that holds all of the details and outcomes.

**Making it Happen**

High-performing teams don’t get into a rut of using the same approach over and over again. Using the 5 phases of a retrospective as your guide, keep the retrospective fresh by using different formats for conducting the session. There are countless resources for selecting a retrospective approach. When considering options, keep in-tune with the principle of “simplicity: the art of maximizing the amount of work not done” in order to ensure the session is as lightweight as possible. Participants will certainly get bogged down if each retrospective feels like a heavyweight overly-ceremonial process.

It’s tempting to let the idea of self-organizing teams infiltrate how retrospectives are conducted; however, decisiveness is a key aspect of success. If you desire the team members to have a say in how the retrospective is run, gather the feedback beforehand in order to prevent using valuable time to debate when the team should be engaging in reflection and discussion. And don’t forget to retrospect on retrospectives. At the end of each session quickly gauge the effectiveness of the approach used in order to inform how future retrospectives are conducted.

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**APPROACHES TO CONSIDER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths &amp; Weaknesses</th>
<th>Circle of Questions</th>
<th>Ratings &amp; Reviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Pre-determine 5 – 7 key activities the team performs in order to complete work</td>
<td>• Assemble participants in a circle</td>
<td>• Brainstorm topics/questions e.g. Did we avoid solving problems during the Daily Meeting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work through items one at a time</td>
<td>• Randomly select a participant to start</td>
<td>• Dot vote to select top 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have each team member write a brief statement for their most significant strength and weakness related to the activity</td>
<td>• Participant asks a question to the person on his left e.g. – How do you think we did with testing early this sprint?</td>
<td>• Individually, participants rank performance on each item 0 (low) negative – 10 (high) positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Discuss insights</td>
<td>• Proceeds until everyone asks a questions</td>
<td>• Participants draft a statement as to why the ranking was selected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Complete at least 2 times, change directions if desired</td>
<td>• Post ratings &amp; discuss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discovery Questions for Rich and Meaningful Discussion

Sadly, retrospectives are a practice that often gets cut from teams. Why? Because when not done well, they are often underappreciated and perceived as a distraction from getting “real work” done. In order to get the most out of retrospectives it’s important to have a safe environment where team members are comfortable with vulnerability and openly and honestly offering feedback. Once created, discussion can be coaxed from participants by using a wide variety of open-ended questions.

Notice none of these elicit yes or no responses. Questions that result in a yes or no answer are close-ended questions that shut down discussion and collaboration. Keep in mind that close-ended questions have a purpose during a retrospective: they are useful for summarizing discussions and wrapping up activities in order to provide closure to the exploration of a topic.

Deep reflection and responses to discovery questions are easier for participants if there is a short cadence between sessions. Imagine replaying all the experiences in your head. Can you see the things that are happening? The memory is distinctly yours, and the retrospective is essentially taking all participants’ perspectives playing back the video. If the replay is too long, it’s much more difficult to recall distinct events and experiences. The discussion ultimately leads us to answering the question, How can we avoid being insane?

Potential Pitfalls and Disruptions

Blame Game
The first dysfunction of a team, according to Patrick Lencioni author of the Five Dysfunctions of a Team, is absence of trust. If the retrospective tends to build trust, then it’s successful. If it destroys trust, then a dismal failure. One terrible retrospective experience may be hard to recover from.

Group Think
This often occurs when participants are working to minimize conflict or rush to a consensus. It often yields a “vanilla” outcome and robs the team of exploring dissenting viewpoints and exploring the topics necessary in order to improve.
Focusing outside Circle of Influence
Focusing outside our Circles of Influence creates a spirit of whining. A bunch of whiners will never get better.

It Never Makes a Difference
So what? We’ve talked about it. Now what are we going to do about it? Substantive new things to try must flow from the retrospective, followed by a commitment to implement the new changes. Teams may struggle with this more if they commit to vague and ambiguous action items or if they attempt to solve everything at once.

Staleness
The same old thing. What went well?, What went bad?, What can we improve?...yawn. Make it new every time. Yes you can recycle previous stuff, but don’t let it become stale.

Not Tailored
The team is not in the mood for deep reflection and really needs a good old-fashioned locker room pep talk. Part of being an adaptive leader is sensing the mood of the team and tailoring the retrospective to meet their needs.

Heavy Handed Facilitation
If a facilitator is too rigid and fails to inspect and adapt on the fly, participants may shut down and the discussion may not explore critical topics in need of reflection.

Ignoring Commitments
Consider whether or not the previous commitments to improve were successful. Insights on actions taken to improve are essential to informing action items coming out of the session.

AFTER THE RETROSPECTIVE

Retrospectives Mean a Commitment to Improve
End retrospectives ensuring participants have a shared understanding of the answer to one key question: what is the next single good change we can make in order to improve? Embracing this question not only as a tool to close retrospectives, but also as a daily mantra will increase quality of the retrospective session and lead the group down a path of embracing a Kaizen culture.

Change doesn’t happen during the retrospective: it happens after the retrospective. Commitments to improve should be SMART goals and objectives (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). Avoid committing to vaguely stated improvement items such as “refine backlog items more.” What is it that you specifically want to try? Why should that be done? How will you know when you’ve achieved it? In fact, it might be useful to use the construct of a user story in order to best articulate the items in a team’s improvement backlog.

There is a danger of people jumping to conclusions and recommending an action before everyone has a shared understanding of the issues. This action will almost always be suboptimal or address the wrong problem.

- Patrick Kua
It may take several iterations of improvement items in order to address something that the team wants to improve. When the team wants to focus on longer-term goals consider Bas Vodde’s Plan of Action technique. Teams using this approach agree to a long-term goal (e.g. decreased re-work due to finding defects earlier) and then list out now-actions that are associated with achieving the goal. The now actions are then prioritized and committed to by the team while the long term goal remains in the improvement backlog and is reflected on in future retrospectives.¹

With any commitment, following through is essential. While the spirit of the commitment may have been good change, it is entirely possible the results may not be good. Not all improvements yield dramatic results and some may leave you worse off. A Kaizen culture understands this will happen. The key is to continually inspect and adapt. How can you learn from that experience and make the next good change on your quest towards higher performance?

**IMPROVEMENT BACKLOGS**

As a team, we want to improve the way we refine backlog items, so that we can decrease our anxiety with rushing around to figure out details during the sprint.
- Try ‘Given, When Then’ to elaborate key scenarios and additional details
- Track time/anxiety during the sprint to see if it decreases

**Kaizen** 改善

[kahy-zen]

noun
1. a philosophy based on making positive changes on a regular basis, as to improve productivity (any good change)
2. an approach to one's personal or social life that focuses on continuous improvement

**Organizational Thinking for Improvement**

Value-oriented organizations’ primary measure of progress is the delivery of valuable products and services. A similar mindset can be applied to measuring the success of a kaizen culture or value of the retrospective. The measure of progress in those situations would be demonstrable continuous improvement. It's difficult to measure continual improvement without data on whence the group came. Whether they are basic value stream analysis metrics from Lean thinking (value add versus non-value add time) or more specific Agile metrics (e.g. velocity or commit-versus-complete) instituting a set of metrics to measure progress will be key for assisting in the inspect and adapt pattern of retrospectives, but will also offer a framework for communicating progress outwardly to the organization.

In addition to capturing and sharing metrics, teams may also want to share the retrospective’s action items or the overall improvement backlog. This documentation could take many forms, ranging from sticky notes on flipchart paper to a simple PowerPoint presentation that captures the equivalent of what would have been on the aforementioned sticky notes to a formal write-up in a document. Regardless of the form, the documentation should be light and should capture only the key outcomes
and learnings derived through the retrospectives without making any references to individuals: the focus is the “what” not the “who.”

This documentation is valuable because it enables the organization to look for patterns across teams or groups. Observing many groups at a macro level encountering a similar hurdle would indicate the need for an organizational-level change that could be made. Also, sharing information across teams encourages collaboration across those teams. Rather than having each team struggle against the same challenge individually, they can share learnings and solutions in order to help realize improvements more quickly.

**WHY AVOID THE “WHO”?**

It’s critical that any documentation of a retrospective be devoid of “who” references, because in large organizations, anything that is documented invariably makes its way up the reporting chain, and if there is information that could be interpreted as an individual’s poor performance, that individual may suffer repercussions as a result of the documentation, which would ultimately defeat the purpose of excluding superiors from the retrospective and all the effort that was put into creating a safe environment.

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**REFERENCES**

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4. Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great by Esther Derby and Diana Larsen ©2006
7. The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable by Patrick Lencioni ©2002
8. There’s a S.M.A.R.T way to write management’s goals and objectives Management Review (AMA FORUM) by Georgia Doran ©1981

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**The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds.**

- Stephen Covey
  *The Eighth Habit*