



The
AGILE


Retrospective

Increase
Participation

IDEAS

Team
Building

Continuous
Improvement

The background is a whiteboard filled with various sticky notes in yellow, pink, and blue. Some notes have handwritten text, and there are blue arrows and a hand-drawn circle with an exclamation mark on the board. The overall theme is agile project management and team collaboration.

The sprint retrospective is the primary mechanism by which an agile team achieves continuous improvement by constructively embracing failure. As a team's "self-critique," it is especially prone to organizational and interpersonal issues that can stifle full participation by all team members. Since critiques are most effective when even the most naïve perspective is represented, it is important to create an environment in retrospectives that minimizes these barriers. This is especially important with a new team, where there is little reason for individual members to have developed any confidence in the "team culture", although these problems can also develop over time in more established teams through project stress, personnel change, or even simple erosion. Done properly, giving everyone a voice, a retrospective is a fantastic continuous team building activity.

ORGANIZATIONS WILL FIND THAT RETROSPECTIVES OVER TIME ARE THE KEY TO CONTINUALLY IMPROVING AND ADDED EMPHASIS NEEDS TO BE PLACED ON MONITORING AND MAINTAINING PARTICIPATION AND ENTHUSIASM FOR THE PROCESS OVER THE LONG HAUL.

Below we identify four barriers to retrospective participation and present some recommendations that can help agencies in this key area needed for long term Agile success.



RETROSPECTIVE, NOT JUST ANOTHER MEETING

The retrospective risks being seen by some, especially new practitioners, as just another meeting. The following can help erase this incorrect perspective:

1. Hold occasional “Retrospective

Retrospectives” - to discuss what is and is not working well in your team’s retrospectives. Did you follow through on the actions suggested? If not, why not? If so, can you see the improvements that resulted? It is amazing how just a few “I’m glad we did that!” moments will make the value of your retrospectives apparent to the team and address distaste for reviews in general.

2. Use varied “games” and thought exercises

- to keep your retrospective meetings from becoming mundane. Esther Derby and Diana Larson’s “Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great” and Luis Goncalves and Ben Linders’ “Getting Value out of Retrospectives, a Toolbox of Retrospective Exercises” both have numerous ideas for how to do this. If “time flies” in a meeting because it holds a participant’s interest, the participant will be less negative about attendance and participation.

3. Consider using a facilitator from outside the

team - It can be very difficult for a team member who has a direct stake in the discussion to be uniformly effective in enforcing basic meeting etiquette with the team, maintain objectivity, and avoid side-conversations in which the facilitator might otherwise have a stake. An outside facilitator has only one job in the meeting, therefore it is more likely to focus on facilitating and keep the meeting productive.

ONCE A TEAM TURNS
THE CORNER AND TRULY
BELIEVES IN THE VALUE OF
THE RETROSPECTIVE, THEIR
ENTHUSIASM GOES UP.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Scrum Masters should keep retrospectives interesting, engaging, and as part of the exercise highlight the valuable outcomes of previous R&R action items. These should be focused, engaging, and visibly relevant to everyone who participates and as a result increase enthusiasm and the all-important participation by that same everyone.



SHY AND QUIET HIDES A LOT OF VALUE

In any group, there will be people who prefer to sit back and let others speak most of the time. If we allow this to happen, we risk losing the value of their perspective and ideas. We've tried these techniques successfully to get people talking:

- 1. Using round-robin as a meeting organization technique** - Round-robin is the technique of making sure to “go around the room” and explicitly solicit input from everyone. This reinforces the idea in the minds of all team members that everyone should participate in the retrospective. It invites the reticent to join in. It forces some of the more dominant personalities to make room in the conversation. We have found this to be an especially effective tool to use when new team members are added, since even people who are not overtly shy can feel unsure of themselves on a new team.
- 2. Skew the order on round-robin so the quiet members get called earlier** - Unfortunately, in round-robin there is a built-in escape for those less eager to participate when it comes to their turn. “Everyone already said what I had to say” may be true, or it may not. We have found that we get far more consistent participation when we subtly change the rotation. You might consider finding a way to randomize the order from meeting to meeting or intentionally call out the shy ones first every time and make it fun and light; it all depends on your team's personalities.

THE SQUEAKY WHEEL GETTING THE OIL IS NOT THE APPROACH YOU WANT TO TAKE IN A RETROSPECTIVE. GATHERING EVERYONE'S INPUT SHOULD BE A GOAL OF THE SCRUM MASTER, ESPECIALLY FROM THOSE WHO ARE QUIET OR HESITANT TO GO AGAINST THE TEAM WITH A DIFFERENT IDEA OR PERSPECTIVE.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Scrum Masters should take specific steps to solicit input from quieter members of the team while not singling them out. Create a welcoming environment and make it clear that everyone's input is important and desirable. This will increase your chances of getting the gold nuggets from the quiet ones.



THE CRITICAL CRITIQUE THAT DOESN'T CRITICIZE

Individuals new to the retrospective may feel it is **ONLY** about finding problems. The following actions can turn the negative perspective to be more positive:

- 1. Focus on the Positive first** – make examination of what is working well and what to continue doing an explicit part of your retrospective agenda. It puts the team in a positive and receptive mindset for the rest of the meeting.
- 2. Failures are an opportunity to learn** – ensure to reinforce the concept that in Agile we like to learn and improve continually. In order to do so, the concept of “what we can do better” or “areas for improvement” will be discussed, but must be a positive discussion.
- 3. Focus on Product and Process** – this is critical to opening up conversation. This helps to create space by taking the focus off of individuals and placing it on the team.
- 4. End with Positive Framing** – some teams become so intent on improving, an hour long meeting will go by with a lot of negativity. A bystander might have the impression that nothing is going well, when in fact the team is trying to refine itself. Make sure to end the meeting by framing it properly in summary. Create a sense of perspective and hopefulness, even if there are a lot of things to work on.

REINFORCE THAT FAILURES IN AGILE ARE DESIRED BECAUSE NOTHING IS EVER DONE PERFECTLY, AND LEARNING THAT SOMETHING DOESN'T WORK IS AS VALUABLE AS LEARNING THAT SOMETHING DOES WORK.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Scrum Masters should be vigilant about keeping the critical parts of the Retrospective in bounds, work to identify the positives because it's very easy to focus on only the negative. Solicit feedback on the failures as opportunities, give kudos for trying and failing, and for admitting failures, even the ones that happen by accident. Taking these actions will remove the perception that this is a type of a performance review or audit and individuals will open and participate.

A photograph of two men in a meeting. One man, wearing glasses and a light blue shirt, is gesturing with his hands while speaking. The other man, also in a light blue shirt, is listening attentively. They are sitting at a dark wooden table with various items on it, including a laptop, a tablet, a glass of water, a coffee cup, and a clear container with pens and pencils. The background is a brick wall.

RETROSPECTIVES ARE NOT A PERFORMANCE REVIEW INPUT

Intimidation is the enemy, imagined or real. There may be individuals who feel the retrospective will contribute to negative annual performance assessments or may be intimidated from a career perspective. It is critical to find both sides of the equation and take actions to eliminate this:

- 1. Use a sticky-note exercise to enable anonymous feedback** - This technique has a side benefit in that major themes get uncovered as several team members say the same thing. But the other is that the feedback is discussed with no reference to who provided it. This increases the safety needed for that naïve perspective to come out and say something, because now instead of a “potentially stupid statement that I made” it becomes “a potentially good statement that someone on the team made.” Make a point to ask for “naïve” perspective ideas, this not only encourages some hidden gems of ideas to be uncovered, but proclaims upfront to an observing management that this is a desired outcome and we want to hear all angles, not just the one’s we may know they favor.
- 2. Exercise extreme caution regarding having management present for your retrospectives** - One key principle of agile, is the principle of the self-organizing team. Sometimes, having managers in the room during a team retrospective can short-circuit that principle unless they were a direct participant or stakeholder in the iteration. If you can, discuss it with the team and let the team decide whether

it is a good idea. If management must be in the room, make sure everyone knows the rules (“Everyone is equal. Everyone is a critic”). But be aware that the rules will go only so far in making the team feel comfortable enough to provide useful feedback. Unfortunately, it is a well-documented phenomenon that employees are reticent to provide input in front of managers. As with all recommendations, it depends on the culture of the team and the individuals, but for an Agency implementation, it may be best to have some consistent rules in this area.

INTIMIDATION IN ANY FORM WILL PREVENT THE NAÏVE PERSPECTIVES AND SQUASHES INITIATIVE AND INNOVATION YOU WANT TO ENABLE TEAM MEMBERS TO TAKE CHANCES WITH THEIR WORK AND WITH THEIR IDEAS. EXPLICIT FORMS OF INTIMIDATION ARE EASY TO IDENTIFY BUT PERCEIVED INTIMIDATION IS JUST AS POWERFUL AND NEGATIVE.

RECOMMENDATION FOR ACTION

Senior management should think carefully and look at retrospective participation across the board keeping an eye on management presence. If there appear to be teams with more or less participation, take a look, and make sure that “fear of retribution” is eliminated from the process.

This white paper is not intended to provide an exhaustive list of guidelines for facilitating effective retrospectives. We encourage you to examine some of the growing body of literature on the topic for a more thorough treatment of the subject. At the same time, we believe we can recommend these techniques for consideration due to our own positive experiences in employing them. Always be improving your processes and people, and this includes the retrospectives themselves. You will discover your own approaches and tricks to increase participation as new team members come on board. In conclusion, whatever you do, always look to maximize participation. You hired good people and the retrospective is one of the most valuable moments in time when you can get as many of their great ideas as you can.

**KEEPING AN EYE ON
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ACROSS A BROADER
AGILE ADOPTION CAN
BE A KEY TO LONG
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To learn more about agile in the federal government and how to improve the retrospective process, visit:

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