

# Retrospectives

**Definition**

A ritual during which the project community gets out the project story, harvests the collective wisdom of the team, tells the truth without blame or judgment, identifies what to appreciate and improve, understands and forgives its failings, and relishes in its successes. The insights gained from retrospectives are the basis for starting again.

Project retrospectives: *your team's best (and least expensive way) to learn.*

**You Have to Slow Down to Speed Up**

Adults are pragmatic learners -- we learn best in supportive environments with our own experiences (e.g., act → reflect → integrate).

It is much easier to identify another's foolishness than to recognize one's own. This is the *Law of Wisdom Acquisition*. Humans need rituals to do this.

Retrospectives are not the classic "lessons learned". They focus on the big picture learning, address the "tough stuff" that really make projects successful, and generate actions for change.

**Five Key Questions (adapted from Norm Kerth\*)**

1. What did we do well, that we might forget to do next time, if we don't discuss it?
2. What did we learn?
3. What should we do differently next time?
4. What still puzzles us?
5. What needs more discussion?

**When do Retros?**

**Interim Retrospectives** provide the greatest payback. Types:

- "Heartbeat": time-based, e.g., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly iterations
- "Work Chunk": milestone-based
- "Custom": (surprise) event based, e.g., new technology, merger, disaster

**End-of-project retrospectives** are for the entire project.

**Kerth's 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.*

\*Kerth, Norman, *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews*, Dorset House Publishing, 2001.

**Structure for a Retrospective**

**Readying:** collect data, establish tone, begin to create safety

**Past:** recreate the story, review significant events, answer the five questions

**Present:** assess our progress, review project data, reflect on facts and feelings

**Future:** identify items to improve and correct, name ways to improve process and products, list actions to sustain and appreciate current good practices

**Retrospect:** reflect on how the retrospective process worked, identify process adjustments