

Retrospectives: Harvesting the Wisdom of Teams

Sometimes, we have to slow down in order to speed up. Retrospectives allow for early learning and correction and may be your team's most powerful tool for process improvement.

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Perhaps the single best way to improve your project results is not with new technology, the latest management craze, fancy Gantt charts or elaborate team-building sessions. Instead, just stop. Yes, your project community's best hope for success is to stop periodically and reflect on their work and interactions—to hold *retrospectives*.

You may be familiar with post-project retrospectives, sometimes called “post-mortems” (why not post-partum!?). Other names include lessons learned, debriefs, audits, after action reviews, and more. Unlike a classic meeting, which typically involves sharing information or status, a retrospective is a tool for learning that also generates new information and action plans. They should be conducted periodically, throughout the project.

In a retrospective, the team -- led by a skilled neutral facilitator -- explores not only the condition of the project's deliverables, but also the team's performance and the quality of their teamwork. The participants include everyone who was involved in creating the deliverables or was otherwise involved in the project during the timeframe being “retrospected”.

Well-run retrospectives follow this overall structure:

1. Get ready.
2. Explore the past.
3. Understand the present.
4. Decide the future.
5. Retrospect the retrospective.

Retrospectives can be as short as one or two hours, especially if the team is in a groove with the process and observes healthy team norms. Initially, plan for longer. Calibrate the timing and length of retrospective to the length of time under review or importance of milestone just completed.

Adult learning theory tells us that people need immediacy, relevance and self-direction for learning to stick. Retrospectives exploit these three needs. The content relates to everyday work. The team explores what works, what does not work, what puzzles them, what to learn from the just completed set of work, and how to adapt processes and techniques before starting anew.

Successful retrospectives share these characteristics:

- They are planned.
- They are held multiple times throughout the project.
- They involve the project community.

- They are led by a neutral, skilled facilitator.
- They use data from the project.
- They acknowledge that feelings count.
- They follow a structure.
- They are the basis for change.

Retrospectives provide team members with a specific way to review, play back, and think reflectively about not only how the project deliverables are working, but also how the group process is working (or not working), and this kind of learning is essential to ongoing success. They help the project community to become more self-sufficient and productive more quickly. They also promote internal and public commitment to corrective action and build not only a solid product, but also a healthy project community.

Resources:

Kerth, Norman L. Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews. New York: Dorset House, 2001.

Gottesdiener, Ellen. "Team Retrospectives for Better Iteration Assessment". The Rational Edge, April 2003.

<http://www.ebgconsulting.com/Team%20Retrospectives%20-%20Gottesdiener.pdf>

Larsen, Diana, "Embracing Change: A Retrospective", Cutter IT Journal, Volume 16, No. 2 pp 39-46. February 2003.

<http://www.spiritone.com/~dklarsen/resources/DLCutter0203article.pdf>

<http://www.retrospectives.com/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/retrospectives/>

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