# RETROSPECTIVES

A retrospective is a meeting held by a team to reflect on its practices, teamwork, achievements and failures with the aim of identifying and committing to actionable improvements.

In order to adapt to changing circumstances and get better, a team needs to learn from its own experience. Running retrospectives helps team members understand and discuss what is working well and what is not working. If the team applies this understanding to continually make improvements, it will ultimately become a better performing team.

Successful retrospectives usually follow this basic structure:

1. **Opening:** ensure that everyone understands the goals for the session and is engaged.
2. **Gathering data:** reflect on what has happened in the time the retrospective covers.
3. **Generating insights:** consider patterns in, and underlying causes for, the team's performance.
4. **Defining actions:** commit to making improvements.
5. **Closing:** ensure the learning is consolidated and documented, actions are defined and followed-up.

Retrospectives work best when they are held regularly. Teams working with product increments or iterations should hold a retrospective after finishing each one. Other teams can build retrospectives around important milestones but should aim to do at least one a month. Retrospectives can also be run in order to look back over the longer term.

## Implementation

**Preparation:**

- Decide what period you want to cover.
- Identify a location that can accommodate the entire team and has lots of wall space. Get hold of the following: flipcharts, sticky notes (Post-its), sticky dots, marker pens, etc.
- Agree a date and time so that all team members are confident that they can attend. Plan about 2 hours for the first one, allowing for more time if you have a big team or are covering a long period.

**Running the retrospective:**

The retrospective should follow the basic structure outlined above. Here, we're suggesting one approach. However, as you run more retrospectives you can introduce variation to keep things fresh by utilising different techniques to gather data or generate insights.

Start the retrospective by setting the stage:

- Welcome everyone and state the purpose of the session, the approach and its expected duration. Set the expectation that active participation is required.

Gather data about the period you are covering by building a timeline:

- Hand out the sticky notes and marker pens. Pick a wall to use for your timeline, i.e. going from left to right to represent the period.

*Outcome*

*Function*

*Benefit*

*Who*

*Scaling Factors*

*Difficulty*

- Ask participants to note events from the period and then put them up in chronological order.
- Invite the team to review the timeline and add more if they want.

Generate insights from the data using the three-question model:

- Write the three questions up on a flipchart or whiteboard, each in its own box: 'What did we do well?'; 'What should we do differently next time?'; 'What still puzzles us?'
- Each team member should put his or her answers up on sticky notes in the relevant box. Allow them to take their time for this section. Each question can be answered more than once!
- When everyone has finished, read out all of the answers. Group or cluster similar items into themes.

Decide what to do with the insights. As a group choose the most important items to focus on:

- Hand 10 sticky dots to each team member and ask them to vote by distributing them among the themes however they want. The winner is the theme with the most dots.
- Brainstorm ideas for actions to address the winning theme. Where possible, the actions should be things that could be completed before the next retrospective.
- Use dot voting again to pick a couple of actions that the team will commit to. Ask one or two people to own each action and follow up on it with the team.

Close the retrospective. Apart from thanking everyone for their time, make sure you do the following:

- Briefly recap the key learning and decisions from the retrospective.
- Document your data, insights and actions by, for example, taking pictures of them.
- Get some immediate feedback on the retrospective to find out if you can do anything differently next time.

## Potential Pitfalls

The retrospective becomes a finger-pointing exercise. This may also make it difficult to get open and honest feedback. All members need to buy in to the fact that the purpose of the retrospective is learning rather than a performance review. Many teams use a 'prime directive' to reinforce the purpose of the retrospective. It is read out and/or written up on a poster at the beginning of the retrospective:

*Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job he or she could, given what was known at the time, his or her skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.*

The retrospective ends without the team committing to any actions. One cause for this is if the team concentrates purely on the external causes of their problems. Encourage the team to focus on what they can do themselves. Another reason for this is running out of time during the retrospective. Try timeboxing the previous stages so that there is enough time to create some actions for the team.

If you want to learn more, consider reading:
*Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great* by Esther Derby and Diana Larsen