

Begin and End Agile Retrospectives with People in Mind



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One of the more powerful aspects of agile software development methods such as Scrum is that they acknowledge the importance of individuals and their interactions in delivering quality software. One aspect of the Scrum process, the Sprint Retrospective is about how to improve the Scrum process. In my experience, retrospectives are an essential part of building an effective scrum team, and time spent planning them is well worth it. Many teams gloss over the parts of a retrospective that acknowledge the human elements of the scrum process, and thus lose an opportunity for significant improvement. By using some simple techniques teams can have more effective retrospectives by putting more emphasis on people.

Allocating time for a retrospective at the end of every 2 week sprint (a common length) can be a challenge. The 5 step structure that Ester Derby and Diana Larson describe in their book Agile Retrospectives is an excellent framework for making good use of retrospective time. The steps are:

- *Set the Stage*, where you introduce the plan for the retrospective, and help people move towards a mindset that will help identify problems
- *Gather Data*, where you collect information about what went on during a sprint. Some of the data collection can happen before the actual meeting, but people will likely think of information to add.
- *Generate Insights*, where you identify patterns and connections between events, and start to consider why things may have happened.
- *Decide what to do*, where you collect ideas for things to do going forward, and then focus on a handful to explore in detail.
- *Close*, where you review action items, appreciate the work people did, and perhaps discuss the retrospective.

In my experience, every step is important. These steps create an environment where people can feel safe, and help the team to explore the really impediments to improvement. Often teams skip steps, merge steps, or don't consider whether the exercises they use at each stage move the process forward. Using structured exercises like those in Derby and Larsen's book help keep the retrospective focused. Another common tendency is to problem solve too early, combining the *Gather Data*, *Generate Insights*, and *Decide What to do* steps. These mistake is often self correcting, as teams discover that they come out of retrospectives with actions that address superficial problems.

A bigger problem is when teams skip the steps that address the humans on the agile team. For example, particular, some facilitators skip over *Setting the Stage*, or *Closing*, in an effort to allow time for the "significant" parts of the meeting. While only a small part of the meeting time, the Setting the Stage and Closing steps, are quite valuable in terms of impact.

Setting the Stage for the retrospective can take just a few minutes, and can improve the effectiveness of the entire meeting by creating an environment where people feel comfortable collaborating. There are many reasons people may not contribute, including simple shyness or lack of attention, or even concern about getting blamed for something. *Setting the Stage* correctly can help engage the team more fully in the process by bootstrapping participation and emphasizing that the retrospective is about improvement not blame.

To help people engage, I often start a retrospective with an exercise that involves going around the room and giving people a chance to say a word or two about something, for example "one word about how they feel the sprint went", or "how they feel about the retrospective ", or even "one thing about yourself that you'd like you share with the team." This often helps people step out of a spectator role. (Note: Always give people the option to say "Pass," since forcing people to reveal something about themselves is counter to the values of a retrospective; even saying "Pass" gets people engaged in the process.)

To reenforce the constructive goals of the meeting, teams I work with sometimes start retrospectives by having someone read [The Retrospective Prime Directive](#), and ask everyone if they agree. While some people initially feel like this process is a bit silly, many teams find it valuable, and make an effort to rotate who reads the Prime Directive.

The *Close* can also be essential to maintaining connections among people on the team. One technique that I encourage teams that I work with to use is appreciations. Appreciations are a structured way of acknowledging the work someone did during the sprint. A quick appreciation can really help people feel engaged and valued, and the process helps the team consider the value each brings to the group. In addition to appreciations, any exercise that gives people a chance to talk about their interactions during the retrospective can also help improve collaboration. Reviewing and summarizing action items is important (since retrospectives that don't generate concrete actions that are followed up on can be frustrating), but it is not enough.

By setting the stage and closing your retrospectives well you can help your team get more value out of retrospectives, and help form a stronger, more effective team. *Inspect and Adapt* isn't just about the tasks, it's about the how the team works too.

This is an updated version of an article originally posted on [Accidental Simplicity](#).