retrium

Become a Retrospective Rock Star

20 AGILE EXPERTS SHARE THEIR BEST TIPS

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The Best Way to Learn Is to Learn from the Best.

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You know how important retrospectives are. You've been told they drive continuous improvement. You've been told they are how you get better as a team. You've been told they are, in many ways, the core of agility.

And yet you also know how hard they are to get right.

That's why we're so thrilled to be sharing this e-book with you.

We asked twenty hand-picked agile experts a simple question: "What's your favorite tip about retrospectives?"

We didn't know what type of responses we'd get, but we did know one thing: they would be well worth the wait.

That's because we know the people behind the tips. And they are all, individually, true experts at agility.

Now that we've compiled all the advice into a single e-book, we couldn't be happier with the results.

If you take the time to carefully read each tip, we can virtually guarantee that you'll be leveling-up your retrospective skills in no time.

This e-book doesn't need to be read cover-to-cover. Instead, we'd recommend reading one tip at a time. Try it out with your team. See how it goes. Then, come back and read the next tip. Rinse and repeat. Iterate and improve.

In time, we think you'll think back to the moment you downloaded this e-book and smile at how far you've come.

5 Rules for Distributed Retrospectives

Distributed retrospectives require new approaches. Don't settle for tools used in co-located retrospectives like Post-it® notes. Explore the technology we have available to make your retrospectives more effective.

TIP CONTRIBUTOR

AGILEBILL KREBS
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TIP #1

Many are used to doing retrospectives face-to-face. We use low technology tools such as Post-it® notes to help us facilitate effectively. However, as many teams shift to a primarily distributed format, new tools and approaches become important.

The first hurdle is underestimating how distributed a team is. Some teams are only partially co-located (and therefore partially distributed). Teams with this setup frequently ask their remote employees to dial-in to a telephone number for meetings. This creates a difficult scenario in which the people on the phone are easily forgotten, since the people in the room can easily see and talk amongst themselves.

So even for partially distributed teams, we need to keep a few rules in mind:

RULE 1 Out of sight, out of mind. If your team is all face-to-face, you have it easy. If your team is all remote, you have it easy. But if you're doing a hybrid meeting, pay extra attention to include the remote participants.

RULE 2 Co-active media. The familiar 'sticky notes' we use in co-located retrospectives should be replaced by an interactive tool. While it's possible to have the facilitator white down things on a slide as people talk, that gives the facilitator too much power and control. It's better to use a tool designed for simultaneous collaboration, such as Google Docs, or better yet, a tool designed with retrospectives in mind such as Retrium. Having a few at hand will allow teams to vary their approach from month to month to avoid burnout.

RULE 3 Dynamic motion. Individuals who are meeting face-to-face can take advantage of the physical space around them by moving to different places in the room. This can provide visual cues, wake up participants after a long day of meetings, and fit well with kinetic learners. If using 3d tools for collaboration such as Terf or AvayaLive engage, design the meeting with purpose to allow significance to where people stand virtually. Some scripted tools such as the 'Opinionator' made good use of this to allow teams to vote with their feet.

RULE 4 Get some numbers. Many coaches have numerical assessments to review where teams want to improve next. These may be surveys or assessments of different lengths, such as the Comparative Agility Survey, agilityhealth℠ radar, or Agile Journey Index. Whatever you use, retrospectives may be a good time to gather or review data from such instruments. These approaches may take more time than other retrospective techniques, and the numbers may change more slowly, so numerical review can be done on a less frequent basis if needed.

RULE 5 Action Actions! Whether face-to-face or online, spend more time on planning and doing actions and new ideas rather than simply listing and forgetting them. One way to do this is to limit or quickly narrow discovery to two key items (picking one would take time to get just the right item, so allowing two may speed that process). Teams can also have a mid-milestone reminder update halfway through their sprint to see if they are making progress on their actions. Start the next retrospective with a review of existing actions. New ideas may not even be needed until the previous ones are completed or purposefully dropped.

Following ideas such as these for distributed retrospectives will keep teams improving!

The Timebox and When to Neglect It

As a rule of thumb, it's important to timebox the retrospective so that it doesn't run into other meetings and take too much time. But sometimes it's okay to extend the retrospective!

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TIP #2

All workshop facilitators have faced moments when they felt unsure whether to stick to the agreed schedule or extend a meeting, workshop or other activity. The group was still busy, or in a deadlock, and somehow it seemed inappropriate to close prematurely.

Timeboxes are a powerful instrument to bring structure, rhythm and focus in our work. They consist of three dimensions: objective, resources and maximally allocated time span. The idea is to accomplish the objective with the given resources in no longer than the time span. This requires discipline and focus. Good facilitation helps the group to get there.

Scrum and other agile process frameworks place a very high value on timeboxes. "All events are timeboxed events", says the Scrum Guide. Scrum Masters or how the team facilitators are called are supposed to help the teams keep their timebox.

That makes sense. As a rule of thumb for instance, we say that if the timebox for a planning meeting is about to run out, we probably have planned enough work for the next Sprint. If the time-box for an estimation meeting runs out, we will probably not expect much more useful outcome of the meeting.

So what about the retrospective? Generally, the retrospective is a timeboxed activity. You want a good detailed agenda for your retrospective. You need to deal with deviations and probably want an alternative sequence in case something took longer than expected.

So could we say that we should always observe the timebox, close the retrospective on time, avoid reaching into other meetings? Yes and No. Here are a couple of suggestions regarding the timebox for retrospectives.

First of all, plan for buffer time after the retrospective. Even if you finish on time, people might need to recover from intense and sometimes emotional debates. Some facilitators place the retrospective meeting at the end of a working day. But a longer break may suffice.

Second, allocate enough time to start with. It is possible to have a meaningful retrospective in a couple of minutes. But think about your participant's "Agile fluency", their interactions, the expected range of topics. A short retrospective would probably not work after a failed customer release.

Third, sharpen your senses. Is there anything crucial going on? Is the group about to „make the magic happen"? Do you have the feeling that just a couple of more minutes could help to finally address the elephant in the room, an unspoken issue, a breakthrough insight?

If so, you have two options to gracefully extend the timebox. If it is just about a couple of minutes, just do it. Don't make a fuss about asking the group or whatever. The participants sense that there is something important going on, too. If you figure out that it is something that will take more time to discuss, ask the group. You can add a smaller timebox with the option to ask the group again.

Using timeboxes to put rhythm and structure in our activities is a great principle. Finding out when to extend them in order to achieve a far better result requires a strong sense for the group, facilitation experience and some courage. A little more time can be highly beneficial.

Vital Few Actions: Getting Things Done with Retrospectives

Don't create too many action items. Change is hard and teams should focus on the vital few actions they can actually accomplish.

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TIP #3

The aim of an **agile retrospective** is to define actions for the next iteration that improve the way of working and help teams to deliver more value to their customers. In agile, shorter iterations are better, as they speed up feedback and enable teams to learn and improve quickly. **In short iterations there is limited room for change.** You don't want to have many actions, preferably only 1 or 2. **More is less,** if you have too many actions then you will get less done. Teams should focus on the **vital few actions** that they can do in the next iteration.

DESTROYING ACTIONS

The idea behind vital few actions is to destroy retrospective actions that deliver lower value, so that only the essential ones remain which result in **changes that stick.** Different techniques can be used to destroy retrospective actions:

Dot voting: Every team member gets a limited number of dots which they use to vote on improvement actions. They cast their vote by putting dots on the action. Distributed teams can use Google docs or sheets or online collaborations tools to vote. Votes should be given to actions that provide the most value when done in the next iteration. Team members are encouraged to give multiple votes to an action, since that stimulates them to focus.

Remove the bottleneck (lean): The team is asked to look at the main iteration flow. They start from delivery and go back until the beginning to find the biggest bottleneck in their product development lifecycle. Next they have to pick one action that help to reduce this bottleneck, and throw away all other actions.

Devil's and Angel's advocate: The team starts by playing the role of the devil's advocate. They pick one action which they think has the least value for the team by bringing up reasons why it wouldn't work or doesn't solve their problems. When only a few ideas are left they change their role to the angel's advocate to bring up ideas why these actions *would* work. Finally they pick only one or two actions that they think give the most value in the next iteration.

Kill actions: Team members are asked to destroy actions that they think have the least value. Initially every team member is allowed to veto against 1 action. Veto's don't have to be motivated, since by voting against an action a team members are stating that they do not support them and will not contribute to get the action done.

TEAMS TRAVEL THEIR OWN AGILE JOURNEY

One of the benefits of retrospectives is that teams are empowered to take action. They can decide which actions they will do. Agile teams are responsible for their own improvement journey. By self-assessing how agile they are and designing valuable agile retrospectives teams can become agile and lean.

The vital few actions retrospective exercise can be used within agile frameworks like Scrum, SAFe, XP or Kanban to have teams agree upon the vital few improvement actions that they will do.

On the Importance of Dwelling on What Actually Happened...

Many teams focus on creating a plan of action at the expense of gathering the right data. Take time to focus on what actually happened before jumping ahead.

TIP CONTRIBUTOR
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TIP #4

In my experience, the focus on spending enough (and exactly sufficient) time on "gathering data" and "generating insight" is the most challenging part of retrospectives – to gather sufficient data on what happened and discuss it. Many people would like to skip this part, or make it very short, as they say ... we know already .... This is particularly true for people with an NT MBTI preference* (of which there are many in IT jobs), who tend to jump straight to the conclusion. They do not think it is important to look at the background and the past – this is what they would typically do for both project and sprint retrospectives.

Therefore my favorite retrospectives tip is: **Remember to dwell on what actually happened!**

Spend the time required for the data collection part of the retro. Collect data on what happened and discuss it. This data is key to the reflection, because it jogs the memory of each participant and creates associations for the other participants. The result is a joint creation of the common picture of what happened (in the sprint, in the project or in the period).

I find that the best technique to promote this generation of shared memory is using a timeline drawn on a whiteboard or brown paper. The timeline visualises the process and it sparks participants' memory. The use of colored post-its to describe the events of the period is an efficient generator of relevant input in a short time. Add emotional seismographs to describe the more emotional dimensions.

HOW:

Preparation

- Prepare the retrospective meeting by collecting facts. For a sprint retrospective this could be e.g. sprint planning, grooming session, sprint review. For projects it could be: contracting, steering committee meetings, startups, supplies, large meetings, etc
- Align expectations by sending out an informative meeting agenda with the purpose of the meeting and a short agenda
- Create a pleasant atmosphere, for example, with food and drink Implementation
- Create, if possible, an atmosphere of "time enough"
(even though there may not be time enough)
- Draw the time line on the board, brown paper or wallpaper
- Add milestones and other major fixed events
- First, let participants write good events in green, and bad incidents on red sticky notes
- Hereafter, let participants add their emotional seismograph on the board
- Discuss in groups or in plenary what key takeaways and conclusions the team sees

RESULT:

The discussion has been processed and focused on what actually happened, how we perceived it; a common picture of how we saw the project is created, and conclusions on what to "keep", "more", "less", "stop" and "new" comes by itself.

Dig Deeper and Don't Settle for the Obvious

Don't settle for the obvious, surface issues. Dig deeper to address causes rather than symptoms.

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TIP #5

The heart of most continual improvement programs is the periodic retrospective. Often I see teams focused on their obvious problems. "We should catch the bugs before we push to production." "We should do a better job at writing unit tests." Or they focus on things they think their management wants. "We should get more stories down each iteration." They then decide to catch more bugs, write better tests, and work faster.

There are two limitations to such a focus. First, these are things already on peoples' minds, and hardly require a retrospective to address. Second, and more importantly, these are things that, if they are effective at all, are generally little more than band-aids on the current situation. The team certainly has not been explicitly choosing to let bugs go to production, write poor tests, or work slowly. Instead, the way that they are working contributes to the results that they see. Any result that appears frequently, or persists over time, is undoubtedly receiving systemic reinforcement.

One approach to digging deeper to address causes rather than symptoms is the Five Whys technique. This involves asking "why" repeatedly until you get to a "root cause." Why don't we get more stories done? Because we're chasing bugs released to production. Why do bugs get to production? Because we break things without noticing. Why don't we notice? Because our unit tests aren't good enough. Why aren't they good enough? Because we're trying to go faster.

Our systems of working rarely have a single root cause for any result. Instead, there are cycles of actions that reinforce the result, making it more likely, and therefore more frequent or prevalent. Rarely can we fix the cycle by just getting better at one step. Nor is the "fix" always obvious without seeing the indirect effects. Without analysis, would you decide to address bugs in production by removing the impetus to go faster?

I find Causal Loop Diagrams or Diagram of Effects to be useful tools for analysis. These model the system of our work and help us see the reinforcing loops that produce the results we don't like. We can look for points in that loop where we can make a choice, thus breaking the loop. We can see where we might add new influence paths to ameliorate loops that are difficult to break.

This helps us address real causes, rather than proximate ones. The fix is unlikely to be in the action right before the result we want to avoid. Instead, it's in the arrangement of multiple actions.

A good starting point for deeper understanding of this technique is found in *Quality Software Management: Volume 1, Systems Thinking* by Gerald M. Weinberg. More recently he has released *How Software Is Built* on LeanPub, covering the same ground. The ideas that Jerry presents in these works have been enormously helpful for me. I think they might help you have more productive retrospectives.

Only People Can Make Your Retrospectives Great

Retrospectives only work if the participants are comfortable and open with one another. Make sure the people at the retrospective know and understand each other to help make that happen.

TIP CONTRIBUTOR
GUILHERME MOTTA
Agile Coach

TIP #6

"What's the one thing you'd recommend to make my retrospectives better?" People awareness makes better retrospectives! What is people awareness?

1. It should be clear WHO will be attending the retro (which is not always obvious!).

2. Each person should know, to a certain degree, the other attendees.

3. The focus of this specific retro should be clear.

4. It should be clear how this specific retrospective connects back to the objectives and values of the group/team/product/project/department/organization.

Here's why it's so important to have people awareness.

Retrospectives are a moment both for reflection and collective thinking. These seem like opposites, and for this very reason it is very important that the group of attendees know and understand each other well.

Here are a few techniques you can use to get to that point:

Peer Introduction
Split the group into teams of two and have each pair introduce themselves to each other. Then go around the room and have everyone introduce the person they were paired with.

Adjective Introduction
Ask each participant to find an adjective that best represents them that also happens to start with their initial [for example: Motta Modest].

2 Truths and 1 Lie
Have each participant introduce themselves by stating two truths and one lie about their lives. Have the group guess which one the lie is.

Together, these activities are safety checks that allow the group to gain visibility into how participants feel about bringing up sensitive topics in an open and respectful manner. When the outcome of the safety check is mostly negative, you might consider pausing the retrospective. It could be harmful for the group and lead to additional disagreements and misalignment between the attendees.

It takes hard work to build a relationship, but it is fairly easy to destroy it. In cases where just one or a few participants are not feeling comfortable, one of my preferred approaches is to go around the table and ask each person to exercise their empathy and pretend that they are the person that is not feeling safe. I ask two questions:

1. Why would this person not feel safe right now?

2. What could this person do in order to change this situation?

Another common scenario that can lead to unequal and uncomfortable discussion is when someone in the group has a superior role or position within the organization. For instance, when managers participate in the retrospective, groups tend to stay quiet and simply agree with everything the manager says. In these cases, one option is to talk directly with the manager to gauge if this person should not participate in the retrospective.

As a participant, you should be aware of the goal and purpose of the retrospective. If you're not sure, it is your responsibility to ask the facilitator for clarification. You want to ensure you're attending the retrospective for the same reason as the rest of the group. In most cases, the main motivation will be related to continuous improvement (kaizen). The catch is: your retrospectives will only work if PEOPLE care, understand why retrospectives are run, and believe in their value.

How to Run Productive Intercultural, Distributed Retrospectives

Retrospectives are a key part of a highly functioning distributed team, but are also very difficult to run well. Take proactive and intentional steps to make them work.

TIP CONTRIBUTOR
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TIP #7

Many teams have people working from different locations. Oftentimes, teams are completely distributed, with team members from different cultures. This poses challenges to agile retrospectives. I believe retrospectives are one of the most crucial parts of distributed collaboration. Even if you don't formally adopt agile or scrum, these two meetings will help the team align and improve. Therefore, distributed teams must experiment with better ways of running them.

In my current team at Ekipa.co, I work with colleagues in Holland (Piotr, my Polish co-founder and myself), Turkey (Jennifer, my American co-founder) and India (my marketeers Raisa and Shalini and our development team). Here are some of our cultural challenges: Piotr, Jennifer and me are all outspoken; we tend to dominate conference calls and have a hard time changing that. Raisa and Shalini are the opposite: they're more silent, but have great ideas. Analyzing this, we could reach all kinds of intercultural explanations (the degree of openness in each culture, the power distance or hierarchical structures, etc). What's more interesting is how to organize 'around' this challenge. What worked for us:

1. **We rotate the meeting facilitator role.** This stimulates each team member to add her viewpoints to the content of the retrospective as well as the process.
2. **We have an online retrospective board (Linoit)** on which team members stick ideas during the week, prior to the retrospective. Inspired by Retrium, which serves this purpose even better, we made three columns: start/continue/stop and 'actions'. In the retrospective, we go through all notes and define actions to be taken by a specific person in a specific sprint.
3. **We made team agreements on how we work** at the start of our collaboration. To structure this, we used the Bridge Canvas, which covers everything from tools to process and team spirit. At intervals, we look back at the team agreements during our retrospective.
4. **Regularly discuss the values of the team:** openness and responsibility. We share stories about these values at play in our work environment and how they helped us. This reinforces people to become more open (and share more ideas) and take full accountability for their own work. We found that it becomes easier to drop roles and titles, openly express our concerns and share improvement ideas.

Obviously, it's important to have a good conferencing setup. I believe you don't need anything fancy, but you do need a good quality HD webcam (I use a logitech cam) as well as noise-reduction audio device (I use a Phoenix Duet). We use Skype for most meetings, sometimes Zoom.

Stuck in a Rut? Use an Impediments Backlog

Running a retrospective is only step one in the improvement process. After a retro is over, make sure you add your impediments to a backlog to track your progress.

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TIP #8

Have you heard any of these complaints: “Nothing ever changes, so doing Retrospectives every Sprint is just a waste of time”....”We only need partial ScrumMasters, since they basically just run meetings”....”so much is wrong, where do we begin?”

Each one of these complaints centers around the insidious nature of impediments: they are everywhere and they are often invisible. We know the agile mindset is one of aggressive, continuous improvement. But how? One key way to help accelerate improvement is to visualize our improvement workload, the exact same way we visualize the product workload. Here are three ways to do just that:

Add Impediments to the Product Backlog. A strong product owner knows that investing into a team yields better output. In fact, every iteration should result both in an increment of product, and an increment of team improvement. So why not manage that work using the Product Backlog? Have the team estimate the team capacity required to solve an impediment or implement an improvement. Then, during regular conversation, the team explains to the Product Owner the ROI or payback period for investing that capacity.

Alternatively, Adopt an Impediments Backlog. Sometimes impediments are bigger than one team. Here, it might be helpful to create a dedicated Impediments Backlog for the whole program. Heck, I’ve used a program-wide “Kaizen Kanban” that tracks just how many issues we’re trying to fix at once.

Finally, Keep an Victory Log. Once an improvement is made, add it to the list of all the team’s progress forward, no matter how small. Now you have data, which you can use to justify ongoing investment: “As you can see, over the last year, we’ve burned 220 points on improvements, which have yielded a gross increase in 1200 points of year-over-year capacity, for a 5X ROI”. That kind of data will easily justify a full-time ScrumMaster or Kanban coach.

So...if you’re stuck in a rut, don’t just run a Retrospective, visualize all the good stuff that comes out of a Retro. If you track your improvement as aggressively as you do your product, you’ll have that high performing team even faster.

Seek Clarity Not Bureaucracy

Using the same retrospective technique every single time is boring and prescriptive. Instead, try different approaches and you might be surprised by what you find.

The rituals in our retrospectives often create a quick death of thought. We often enter the retrospective with a format: **What went well | What went poorly | What could be improved.** Three important questions, sure. But if that's the only way you look at your work, they quickly become myopic. You come expecting to fill in those columns, you will fill in those columns, and then you will be done filling in… those columns. That's as boring to do over time as that sentence was to read (and write).

Instead, try to look at your work from different perspectives. Lay out the work that was done over an importance and urgency or effort and impact matrix. Talk about your work (with actual discussion) in a Lean Coffee. Instead of picking the thing that sucked the most, what if you picked the thing that was the most awesome and asked "how can we improve that?" If you focused on building strength rather than slaying yesterday's dragon, what might that look like?

Different perspectives, different questions, will give you clarity into your work. Simply filling the same form will destroy your soul.

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TIP #9

Perform Management Retrospectives

Even as a manager, it's important to run retrospectives to ensure you are creating the best environment for the people doing the work.

When we consider retrospectives, we most often think of teams and what they can learn from the previous chunk of time or activities. That's great. It's not enough. Management retrospectives can be even more valuable.

Managers create the environment in which people can succeed. When managers do the same things over and over, without reviewing the effects of their actions, they might not create the best possible environment.

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TIP #10

One manager, Tilly, was concerned that her boss Clive, kept asking her teams to work on more than one project at a time. Clive wanted to see "progress" on everything. Tilly had explained that multitasking didn't work. Clive kept asking for multiple projects. Tilly decided to conduct a retrospective with her peers and Clive.

During the 45minute retrospective, which covered the previous two weeks, Clive saw data that showed the teams slowed their work when they tried to work on multiple projects during the same weeks. Tilly and her peers compared the teams' progress when they only worked on one project for a given week.

Once Clive had the data, now they all had to problem-solve together. They developed several ideas that the teams experimented with over several weeks. They decided on one alternative that helped Clive see "progress" on more than one project per team, and helped the teams make the progress they wanted.

Management retrospectives help people see what is working, what is not, and to generate alternatives as a team. You might not need a management retrospective every week. If you want to create the best environment for the people doing the work, consider a retrospective once a month.

My best tip is to perform management retrospectives. You don't need to spend a ton of time, and you will gain tremendous value.

Get Everyone Involved

Even as a manager, it's important to run retrospectives to ensure you are creating the best environment for the people doing the work.

TIP CONTRIBUTOR

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TIP #11

Every so often people are asking me how they can ensure that not always the same people contribute and that every participant of a retrospective is engaged. The drawbacks of the non-engagement is obvious, these are mainly the missing perspectives of everyone and the lack of buy in of the ones not taking part actively. In this contribution I want to explain what to watch out for and what to do in order to get everyone involved.

DIFFERENT NEEDS

"Every person obtains information differently. Some people, known as visuals, learn most effectively by watching, auditories, by listening; and kinesthetic, through action" (Eckstein, 2004). Moreover, extroverts are most likely happy to talk out loud even in a larger group, whereas introverts are hesitant to speak up even in a small group. "In order to discover each team member's competence and comfort levels, use various modes of communication that address different persons differently, respecting their unique sensory modalities" (Eckstein, 2010).

THE FACILITATORS AS A BALANCING FORCE

According to theme-centered-interaction by Ruth Cohn for every meeting it is important to understand that there is a need to balance a triangle consisting of I (how each individual is here and what he/she needs), we (how are we as a group here and what do we need), and it (what is the topic at hand and how can be ensured it is "solved") (Cohn, TCI). This triangle is surrounded by the environment (Cohn calls this the globe), which is in which the space, time, and circumstances the meeting takes place. Now, balancing does not mean to ensure that we put the same emphasis at all times to I, we, and it. In order to make progress the triangle needs to tip from one corner to the other, putting an emphasis at the different corners in turn. If we would ensure a balance at all time, we would be stuck. And if we put an emphasis at only one thing e.g. at the topic only by ignoring the needs of the individual and the group, we would be stuck as well.

CHANGE WORKING GROUPS SIZES AND APPROACHES

The most powerful and at the same time easiest thing to do is to change the number of people working together during the retrospective. For example, ask a question, i.e. "Consider various ways we communicate in the team. Which are the most effective?" on which participants are invited to reflect individually. Then ask them to share their ideas in pairs, before they should look for common themes and striking differences in fours. This small group is then invited to present their findings to the whole group.

Change the number of people working on something from individuals, to very small groups, to small groups, and finally to the whole group.

You might want to combine this with changing the working style – or without the combination just change the working style from time to time. Using the example above, ask the individuals to answer the question in writing e.g. on stickies, then invite the pair to share their thoughts by talking it through. And finally ask the small group of four to come up with a drawing that reflects their findings. Of course another idea would be inviting them to act out their findings.

Change between working styles. That is between talking, writing, drawing, acting.

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TIP #12

The Importance of Regular Retrospectives

Don't put off the retrospective simply because it's hard. Problems don't solve themselves!

David Horowitz of Retrium, sent me an email asking 20 people for their favourite tip about retrospectives.

I thought on this for a while and couldn't think of a single thing. After all, there are many good areas to discuss ... there are different types of retrospectives, interesting facilitation techniques, and useful ways to structure difficult conversations. All of these different topics are all worthwhile, and how could I choose only one favourite tip from a sea of ideas? There were just too many options for me to be able to make a decision.

I looked at David's email for each day for several days, and each day I thought it was too difficult and moved on to something that didn't require a decision.

Rather than try and address the problem, I put it off. And, as expected, the problem didn't get solved.

Once I understood my behaviour the topic for this article became clear... **Retrospectives need to happen on a regular consistent basis.**

Having a Retrospective at the end of each and every Sprint, forces the team to reflect on their behaviour, teamwork, and output during the Sprint. Without a regular Retrospective, teams can avoid difficult topics or behaviours and, it's only possible to address the teams problems once we know what they are.

Many teams will stop having a Retrospective when everything is working well. This is often a mistake. Once the regularity of the Retrospective is lost, the team no longer have a forum to discuss any issues that may arise. **It's important to have a Retrospective when the team has problems, but it's just as important when things are working well...** even if it's just going to the nearest coffee shop with the team and having a casual conversation for 30 minutes.

How to Run Amazing Virtual Retrospectives

Virtual teams need retrospectives too. To run them effectively, minimize background noise, use great equipment, embrace video, and elect a facilitator.

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TIP #13

Co-located teams get continuous feedback because they are together a lot. Virtual teams need continuous feedback too. One way to create a feedback loop on remote teams is by hosting regular retrospectives.

On every team, there are small frustrations that can build up over time. Things that might seem too trivial to bring up in the moment, or that don't get brought up because of time constraints. Regularly scheduled retrospectives gives the team a set of times where they can raise and discuss issues together.

The process for hosting a remote retrospective is similar to hosting it in person except that a virtual tool (like Retrium, ahem) is used to collect thoughts rather than walls with sticky notes or flipcharts. There are many styles of retrospectives, but a high-level overview of the process looks like this: The team generally begins with a silent brainstorm to collect topics. The topics are then categorized, voted on, discussed one by one until the team runs out of either topics or time.

Being in the same room with people during a retrospective is powerful because of the high-bandwidth communication that we have. We can see if someone is tired or frustrated. We can pat people on the back or give them high fives. When we go remote, we want to simulate that high-bandwidth environment as much as possible.

My top tips for doing this are to minimize background noise, use great equipment, embrace video, and elect a facilitator.

Online conversations quickly become frustrating when the sound quality is bad. If we want to create a smooth communication experience online, we need to have quiet backgrounds. The barking dog and cafe sounds are fun and amusing at first, but they quickly become distracting interruptions for team conversations. Don't be afraid to invest in great noise canceling headsets, webcams, video software and conference room equipment. Technology has come a long way in the last five years and prices are more accessible.

Pro Tip: choose a video tool where you can still see each other when you share your screen. Remote teams do a lot of screensharing, and as soon as we can't see each other, many of us lose focus.

Because the nonverbal communication is one of the more important aspects of co-located retrospectives, we can turn the webcams on when we go remote. As humans, we're designed to react to each other visually. When we can't see each other, we quickly become distracted and detached. Using video helps to humanize the conversation and creates a more engaging team atmosphere. When we can see each other, we can gauge the moods of our colleagues and better observe how everyone is doing. It also helps the flow of the conversation because we can see when others want to speak, or when people are shaking their heads to agree or disagree.

Online or not, electing someone to facilitate the retrospective gives the process structure and can help focus the team on the agenda. Facilitators are there to create a safe space for honest feedback. A good facilitator can ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak and that there is follow-up on action items.

Retrospectives are a vital part of the feedback loop on remote teams. Working together in the same space gives us a lot of contextual feedback and opportunities to share concerns and delights. On a remote team, we need to create a space for these things to be brought out into the open. Scheduling regular times to check in with each other gives remote teams the opportunity to fine tune relationships. Investing the time to create a high-bandwidth environment will encourage profitable conversations.

The Top 4 Ways to Follow through on Retrospectives

The retrospective itself isn't enough to achieve continuous improvement. You have to follow through on the promises made during a retro to be truly effective.

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TIP #14

When I was asked, "what's the best tip you have for effective retrospectives?" my mind immediately turned to the best way to follow through on your retrospective promises. There are four different techniques that I'd like to share.

THE AMBASSADOR TECHNIQUE

Using the Ambassador technique, the team nominates someone to be a "Topic Ambassador" for each item on its action plan. This person is responsible for "owning" his or her action item and must ensure the team does everything it can to follow through on it during the upcoming iteration. Making an individual responsible for an action item encourages ownership of the retrospective.

ADD THE RETROSPECTIVE ACTIONS TO THE TOP OF THE SPRINT BACKLOG

To keep retrospective action items fresh on everyone's mind, I find it very useful to put them on at the top of the sprint backlog. This technique requires that the Product Owner is closely aligned with the team and that he understands how important it is to continuously improve by tackling the team's main issues. I usually coach my teams to select one single action item, and together with the Product Owner move it to the top of the sprint backlog. By using this approach, the story with the most importance each sprint is the highest priority item from the previous retrospective. This approach guarantees that the team does not forget their retrospective agreements during the sprint.

USE THE DAILY SCRUM TO ASK ABOUT PROGRESS ON YOUR RETROSPECTIVE ACTION PLAN

Starting the daily scrum by asking about progress made on retrospective action items is another way to keep the retrospective at the front of the team's mind. This might seem very easy and simple, but it's hard to understand how powerful it is until you try it out. And it becomes even more powerful in combination with the Ambassador technique, since the team can ask each Topic Ambassador for updates, and then make sure that person is working on it.

As the Scrum Master, it is not enough to simply ask the responsible person for an update, it is also important to facilitate the process of helping that person fix the issue (or else, help the person identify the individual who can fix it). If you're lucky, small problems may be solved by the next daily scrum. Otherwise, make sure to continually follow up on each subsequent day to find a way to solve this problem as soon as possible.

CREATE A KANBAN BOARD FOR RETROSPECTIVE ACTION ITEMS

Some time ago on one of my coaching gigs, I created an idea board and asked my teams to put potential retrospective topics on it throughout the sprint. The board was useful because it gave the team a space to record its improvement ideas as they thought of them, rather than having to wait for the retrospective. But it wasn't good enough! Later I realized that although the teams used the idea board to collect and record their thoughts, they failed to follow up with most of them! So, I replaced the idea board with a kanban board (which has three columns: "To Do", "In Progress", and "Done"). All ideas generated were put in the "To Do" column. The kanban board provided context: these were action items, not merely ideas.

There are many other ways to make sure teams will follow up with their agile retrospectives, but I believe these four techniques will give you plenty of ideas to help you follow-up on your agile retrospective action plans.

How to Manage the Dreaded ...Awkward Silence...

Good retrospectives lead to difficult conversations, which lead to awkward silences. Embrace them. They tend to lead to valuable contributions.

Being spontaneously honest and articulate at the same time is difficult, especially for introverts. It's no secret that software engineers tend to lean toward that part of the personality spectrum, which can make the retrospective the most emotionally draining ceremony in Agile. This can lead even the most high performing dispersed teams to uncomfortable lulls in conversation: the ...Awkward Silence....

In confronting ...Awkward Silence..., it's supremely easy to let the few, same well intentioned extroverts dominate this important discussion at the end of each Sprint. They are always willing, and it's an easy way to manage it, but this makes your retrospective limited in perspective. On the other hand, prodding quiet people into saying things for the sake of saying something is not useful and does nothing other than fill up time, annoy everyone in the meeting and creates waste in the ceremony. However, we know that if people take advantage of being remote as a way to not participate is also toxic to the team dynamic. So, what to do? As with most things, there is a range of solutions that you can consider.

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TIP #15

At Sococo we have a complex product and our team is particularly thoughtful, so most team members like to process their ideas and then articulate them as clearly as possible. We realized that in many cases, we need to work through the ...Awkward Silence... by being patient, letting them play themselves out and just giving people a little time to think. Eventually, a contribution will usually come through, and that will usually lead to further discussion among the team.

That being said, there are limits to everything, including the amount of time you have in your retrospective. Your retrospective leader must ensure that the ...Awkward Silences... are time-boxed. When the time-box limit is hit, it may be necessary to call on specific people to break the ...Awkward Silence.... In this case, make sure that 1. you ask a specific question, and 2. you don't pick on the same people at each time-box limit. It's tempting to target the notorious under-participators, and that's not really a fair practice as it may alienate some team members. The retrospective leader needs to ensure that the call-upons are evenly distributed, so that all perspectives are shared and the team can move forward in a more wholistically well-informed way.

It's completely normal for distributed teams to experience ...Awkward Silence.... It may happen periodically or chronically, and as long as it is acknowledged, understood and managed, your team may actually benefit from it!

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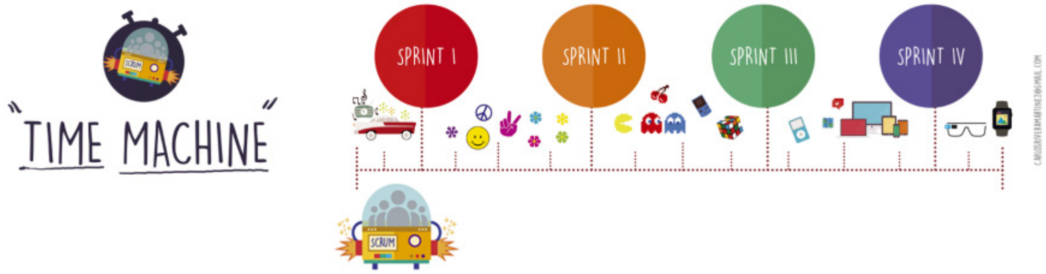
TIP #16

Focus on the Long-term, Not Just the Latest Sprint

To solve systemic issues, you need to focus on more than recent history. Look back on previous sprints to gain extra insights into the truly tricky problems.

Many issues that teams face are systemic. They recur time and again, sprint in and sprint out. Because of their systemic nature, teams have the tendency to overlook them in their retrospectives. They are just "part of working here." That doesn't have to be so!

To help overcome systemic issues, I recommend using a great exercise called **"The Time Machine".**



STRATEGY
The idea of this activity is to travel back in time to four sprints ago (you can choose another number of sprints, but sometimes it's hard to remember what happened more than four sprints ago, so be careful not to overdo it!).

PROCEDURE
- **Explain the activity** Start the exercise by having the Scrum Master explain that the goal is to look back in time to find systemic issues that seem to recur from sprint to sprint.
- **Create a timeline of events** Have each team member add issues to the timeline for each sprint under consideration.
- **Vote** Have the group vote on the issues that are most relevant to them (I usually use two votes per person that team members can distribute as they wish, i.e. all votes on one issue or one vote on two issues).
- **Create action items** The last part is to create an action item for the two issues that bubbled up to the top (the issues that got the most votes). I strongly recommend having an individual take ownership over each action item to ensure follow-through. Finally, set a deadline so that actions don't drag on forever!

THE RESULT
The Time Machine technique really isn't that different in form from other popular retrospective techniques. What makes it different in practice is the mindset of thinking back in time.

By doing so, your team can solve systemic issues instead of focusing exclusively on the present. Give it a shot. Time travel isn't impossible after all!

Pairing for Connection in Distributed Retrospectives

To ensure everyone on a distributed retrospective is able to contribute, try the "buddy system".

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TIP #17

In our distributed retrospectives, one of our biggest challenges is to make sure everyone is "connected" in the retrospective. Can everyone equally jump into the conversation? Can everyone "raise a hand" to call attention to their point or to queue their input on a topic? Can everyone equally vote on a next step in the retrospective? Can we all see when people are engaged or not? In my experience, the activity of pairing with another person can help us answer "yes" to these questions.

For retrospectives, pairing allows you to maintain a connection with a remote person, to help them remain engaged and have input on what the rest of the team is doing and deciding. There are two ways I have found pairing to be valuable in distributed retrospectives: pairing of participants and pairing of facilitators.

First, let us discuss some of the different types of retrospectives that could occur. One of the most common is what I like to call the "satellite" distributed retrospective. In this situation, you may have the main team in one location with one or more remote team members participating. As we set the stage[1] for the retrospective and discuss working agreements, I'll talk to participants about the value of a "Buddy System"[2] and ask if each person in the room can be a buddy to one of the remote people. This means that the person in the room will have a laptop with a chat application that has a window dedicated to that remote individual. Then if the remote person has difficulty getting the attention of the team or the facilitator, they can ask for the aid of their buddy.

A second type of distributed retrospective is the "globular cluster" where you have different groups co-located at different locations. As the main facilitator in one location, I will ask for a volunteer co-facilitator at the other location a few days before the retrospective. I then meet with the co-facilitator to talk through my plan for the retrospective, get their input, and even come up with a backup plan[3] in case we need to change direction. Then, during the retrospective, I will frequently check in with my co-facilitator to either ask them to run parts of the retrospective (so "control" of the retrospective is also distributed and allows everyone to feel they are all equally distributed) or to check-in with the body language of the participants at the other locations, or to help me monitor the chat backchannel[4] for other discussions to bring into the verbal conversations.

Whether I'm pairing with a co-facilitator or just pairing with another participant in a distributed retrospective, finding ways to "pair" in a distributed retrospective can dramatically improve the engagement and outcomes for your distributed teams.

Good Retrospective Facilitators Act Like Designers: They Steal the Best Ideas from Every Place Possible

Retrospectives can be boring if you do the same thing sprint in and sprint out. Mix up your facilitation technique, or even your facilitator, to keep things fresh.

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TIP #18

Starting out as a retrospective facilitator can be daunting. What if the team doesn't engage? What if my facilitation doesn't work? How would I deal with tough interpersonal dynamics that might surface? What if the team gets bored after a while? These are probably thoughts that you have had at one point or another. I certainly have. And I still do from time to time.

What helped me get started was to facilitate with a small team: One person would lead, two people would help by scribing, watching the room for energy, etc. That way everyone got to practice a specific area of facilitation in a safe, supportive way. Over time we rotated through the roles. You can steal this idea.

If you facilitate retrospectives in an Agile context, it may be difficult to keep them fresh. In addition to looking for new activities you can use (I won't make a list of places to go for that here – Google is your friend), I will ask you to consider taking a break from retrospectives for a bit. Maybe skip an iteration or two, then start again. Breaks in a routine can be good for rejuvenation. Think of it as a kind of "vacation." You might use the break to look for new activities or for talking to other facilitators about their ideas for renewal. You can steal this idea.

Let's say you have found a new activity that you want to try with your team. Instead of using it right away, see if you can leave it for a bit. You may find that by letting activity "simmer" a bit in your mind, you can improve on it and adapt it for your team's specific needs. You might encounter situations in the day-to-day work that can help you shape the activity – custom-fit it, so to speak. If you forget about the activity over time, that might be an indicator that it wouldn't work with your team or your facilitation style. You can steal this idea.

Of course, all of the above isn't really stealing ideas. It's learning about what works and what doesn't. And that is probably the heart of retrospective facilitation.

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TIP #19

Use Ice-breakers to Overcome Resistance to Retrospectives

To overcome resistance to the retrospective, try icebreakers.

There are many techniques that help a facilitator follow the basic process of a retrospective; gather data, generate insights, prioritise the points arising, identify solutions, define actions to help achieve those solutions.

However for this process to be truly effective requires the full commitment and participation of all attendees. This isn't always easy to achieve; often development team members inexperienced in Agile see the retrospective as the least meaningful of the Scrum ceremonies, and it's frequently the first ceremony dropped once delivery pressure kicks in. Further, even when you convince the team to attend your retro, you can never be sure of everyone's commitment.

To help overcome this there's a simple technique a facilitator can use to engage the participants' attention: the ice-breaker. Often overlooked, the ice-breaker can make the difference between an engaging discussion with a useful outcome, and a group of people sitting in a meeting room wishing they were elsewhere.

The objective of an ice-breaker is straightforward; to help remove barriers that prevent attendees from becoming participants, and in doing so allow attendees to express themselves freely.

You can find many resources on the web that give great ideas for ice-breakers, ranging from simple, human interest questions to be answered just by going round the group, such as "If you could holiday anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?", or, "What's your favourite item of clothing and why?" etc., to more complex games that require materials and group work. If you know your team you may know immediately what to ask, but in any case search the web, you'll find plenty of ideas.

However for correctly-sized Scrum teams I recommend keeping ice-breakers simple, particularly if working with inexperienced teams. If you make the ice-breaker process too complex you risk disengagement from the start, especially with reluctant participants.

Even when you choose a simple ice-breaker question, remember to time-box it and don't let the conversation drift. Avoid letting someone answer at length or go off topic; you're looking for open and honest responses that bring smiles to the group, help relax the atmosphere yet still fit into your retro time-box without negatively impacting the main objective of the retro.

Finally, ice-breakers are often considered only at the start of a retro to ... well ... break the ice! But retros don't always go to plan, sometimes communication channels can freeze mid-meeting. If this happens don't be frightened to throw in another (simple) ice-breaker to help warm up those communication pipes! Or, if you're running a longer retro and plan to have a break think about using an ice-breaker to kick off the second part of the meeting, too.

Appreciations

If you find your retrospectives focusing on the negative, add time to do appreciations. They make us feel better!

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TIP #20

What is my favorite retrospective facilitation technique? That's tough – there are so many good ones, but there is one that stands out as being simple to facilitate, yet powerful in effect. It is the "Appreciation".

An appreciation is a statement in this form:
Person A says, "(Person B) I appreciate you for (doing a specific thing) because it helped me (in a specific way).

For example:
Pat says, "Alex, I appreciate you for making our database conversation visible on the whiteboard because it helped me see that there was more than one possible solution."

Such statements can be powerful for both the giver and the receiver.

An appreciations activity works like this. The facilitator announces that it is time to offer appreciations and then describes the process. The rules are:

- Anyone can start by offering an appreciation (in the above format).
- Anyone can go next; i.e., statements are offered at random.
- Each person may offer zero, one, or many appreciations; it is an opportunity, not an obligation.

It may take a few moments of silence before the first person speaks as people collect their thoughts. Statements continue from random team members until they naturally die down and stop. After a few moments of silence the facilitator pronounces the appreciations activity closed.

Why appreciations? Because they make us feel good! When we feel good all kinds of good things happen – we sit taller; we breath deeper; we feel more empowered; we are more creative; we are more empathic; we are more resilient.

Appreciations at the close of a retrospective are a great way to send the team back into the real world feeling empowered. Appreciations at the beginning of a retrospective are a great way to close the iteration work and set the team up for the retrospective work ahead.

"Whoa" you might be thinking. "That sounds much too touchy-feely. My team won't go for that. What if someone is left out? Won't it seem contrived?"

Those are natural concerns, and I respect them. It is sad but true that speaking in explicitly appreciative terms is outside the norm of most business cultures.

However, in my experience these don't actually turn out to be problems. People often get over the touchy-feely discomfort once you get them to try it. The good feeling they experience tends to outweigh the initial awkwardness. Team members tend to look out for one another. They notice when someone is being left out (even though there is no official tally) and make an effort to appreciate that person. The facilitator can help make sure the offerings are genuine and not contrived by attending to psychological safety issues and avoiding overuse.

Here are some facilitation keys:

- Announce the activity with confidence. If you don't think it is weird, they won't think it is weird.
- Announce the start and end of the activity. It indicates the specific time set aside where rules for "normal" conversation have been suspended.
- Model the behavior by being the first to offer an appreciation.
- Resist the temptation to go round the room and have everyone speak! It must be seen as an opportunity not an obligation; it must be safe for someone to remain silent if they so choose.
- If no one has anything to offer after waiting a few minutes, simply close the activity. Consider it data and follow up later to search for the reason – lack of safety? Team at odds with one another? Exhaustion? Something else?
- Avoid overuse. Use it sparingly enough that it feels like a treat, not an obligation.

In my experience appreciations can have a dramatic effect on the team culture, not to mention the fact that they make me feel good too.

You're on Your Way to Better Retrospectives!

The tips in this book were brought to you by some of the best agile minds in the industry. So give them a shot. We think you'll see they are well worth the effort.

And while you're at it, we'd love for you to give Retrium a try! It's a tool that helps you run easy, fun, and engaging retrospectives.

Your first 2 retrospectives are 100% free!

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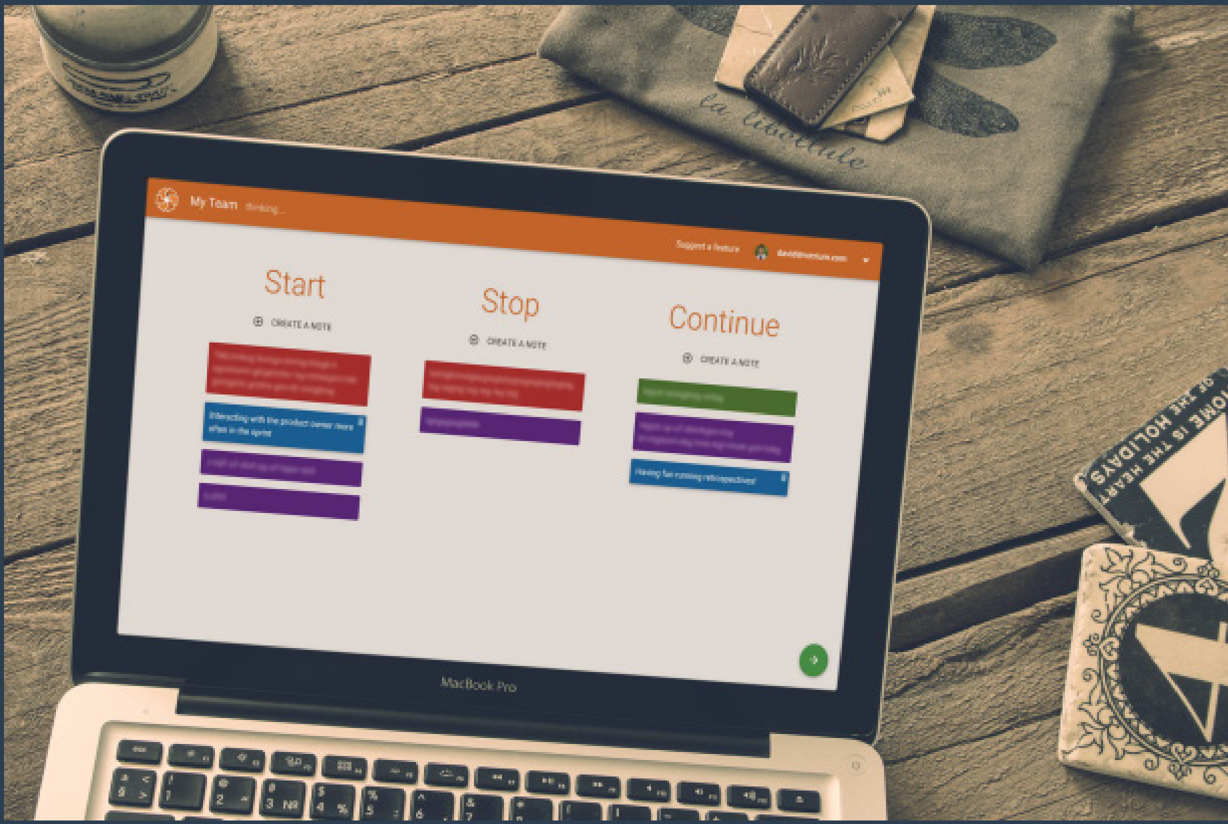

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Footnotes

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*Myers Briggs Type Indicator has for major preferences (NT, SJ, SP and NF). The NT are the strategists.

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1 Diana Larsen and Esther Derby. Book: Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great. Chapter 1 (and throughout the book) describes one of the five stages in the retrospective framework described by the authors is "set the stage".

2 Mark Kilby, blog post on http://markkilby.com: "Remotely Agile: The Buddy System".

3 Chapter 2 of the Agile Retrospectives book talks about selecting 2 activities for each stage of your retrospective as part of your backup plan.

4 Mark Kilby, blog post on http://markkilby.com: "Why you want a Backchannel in distributed meetings".

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