



Update

Using the Retrospective for Positive Change

by Diana Larsen

In every organization, upper levels of leadership are deeply involved with continuous organizational change. In response to rapidly variable internal and external business needs, leaders seek ways to improve processes, quality, and customer relationships. Each well-managed, successfully implemented improvement requires an individual, work unit, or project team somewhere in the organization to do or think about things differently — that is, to make a change.

Change that is deeply effective and positive presents a paradoxical challenge. On the one hand, there needs to be an appreciation and acceptance of how things are in the here and now. On the other hand, there needs to be an active intention to make things better. Nothing needs to change, and everything can improve. This is the way to avoid the two extremist traps of activist's frustration or pessimistic complacency. [1]

— Dr. Hunter "Patch" Adams

Unsuccessful improvements and poorly managed change efforts leave weary, cynical employees and managers in their wake: the source of Adams's "frustration or pessimistic complacency." The trouble with many process and quality improvement initiatives is how quickly they are perceived as

a search for what went wrong and who's to blame. What began as a noble, forward-looking focus on organizational learning and effective customer interactions sinks under the weight of everyone's interest in shifting attention from "us" to "them."

How do we build an "appreciation and acceptance" of the state of things in the here and now without devolving into a blame session or, worse, an avoiding-the-blame session? And how do we do that while simultaneously holding the "active intention" to improve? Many leaders have found a way through sponsoring facilitated retrospectives as the final act of every project.

What is a retrospective? At its simplest, it is a facilitated gathering of the significant project stakeholders (including the development team members and other critical players) to review their project experience, learn from the experience, and plan for future projects. In this instance, stakeholders are those who can strongly affect or are strongly affected by the project. Stakeholders may include developers, testers, project managers, product managers, customer proxies, administrative staff, and, of course, actual software users, among others. Each person involved has a slightly different perspective on the project and therefore a different part of the project story. Only by

assembling all the pieces into a coherent whole do we really get the complete picture. Moreover, telling the story is only the beginning.

Much more than a usual end-of-project review, a retrospective guides a project team to reflect on the technical, human, and organizational systems that make up its story. An effective retrospective facilitator avoids descent into blame and judgment by keeping the focus on “appreciation and acceptance” of each person’s contribution to the story. Kerth’s Prime Directive, from Norman L. Kerth’s *Project Retrospectives*, provides a focal point for blame-free discussion: “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” [2].

Once the story is as complete as the group can make it, the retrospective shifts from storytelling to a treasure hunt for the organizational wisdom that lies just below the surface. Finally, it goes further to instill the “active intention to make things better.”

A successful software development project without a retrospective as its final task fails to capture all the value generated by the substantial investment in staff, facility, and equipment assigned to the project. It’s like playing poker and leaving some of your winnings on the table. A cancelled or failed project without a retrospective as its closure fails to adequately prepare those involved to move on to their next assignment, as well as overlooking the wealth of wisdom gained in the project experience.

Even a single retrospective on one significant project increases shared organizational wisdom — the learning that comes from reflecting on

experience — and motivates effective improvement and change. However, institutionalizing the practice of holding a retrospective at the end of every project conveys a host of benefits, both to the teams and the larger organization. Leaders in IT departments and software firms where retrospectives have become a standard in projects testify to the many advantages of retrospectives.

BENEFITS OF REGULAR PROJECT RETROSPECTIVES

■ Institutionalized focus on process, product, and quality improvement.

- “We are forming teams to define process improvements based on best practices. ... There has been a lot of good information transferred to the people working on the next series of releases.”
- “After the retrospective, there were strong feelings that there needed to be changes in the way that releases were organized, and we have implemented new project teams as a result.”

■ Transfer of organizational learning from one project team to the next.

- “We hold more cross-functional meetings and information transfer meetings to improve people’s understanding of what is being worked on and to find out if there are any concerns or issues that need to be resolved for the release.”
- “Since the retrospective, we have hope that [future project teams] will be able to build on the successes identified in this project and these releases will become the basis for even more successes and improvements.”

■ Individual and team development accomplished through real work.

- “We pushed accountability and responsibility for the content of the releases down to individual project teams and managers. Team members in the retrospective asked for it.”

■ Change that sticks.

- “As a leader in my organization, I’ve learned to always look back on a project with retrospectives. The best way to have buy-in from programmers is if they understand that their input has value and can effect change in the process.”

As Socrates said, “Wisdom begins in wonder.” Taking the time at the end of a project to tell the project story and ask the wondering questions leads not only to the usual list of lessons learned and best practices but also to the kind of thinking that transforms the lessons into wisdom: commitment to improvement and innovation.

A retrospective encourages IT staff members to take a broader view of the business case for their work and to recognize the paradoxical need to think in inclusive terms about quality, cost, schedule, and other influential factors. Automatically applying best practices that worked well on the last project will, all too often, yield mediocre results at best. A commitment to “best practice thinking,” informed by a variety of perspectives, will generate situationally ideal practices. Development team members more easily adopt changes in process and direction when they have a hand in devising the change and particularly when the change is guided by their own project experience. Rather than the fabled resistance to change, leaders

may discover that the team is out in front leading the charge.

Is your organization reaching its full potential in acquiring and using its wisdom in developing software? Are your processes and systems fully optimized to accomplish your goals or to meet your customers' expectations? Are your quality improvement transitions accomplished with minimal disruption in performance? If you cannot answer these questions with a resounding yes, add retrospectives to your project management goals. The steps are simple:

1. **Plan to conduct a retrospective at the end of the project from the beginning.** (You may also want to hold mini-retrospectives at significant project milestones or after each iteration or sprint.) Make retrospectives a standard part of the overall project budget. A serious commitment to retrospectives sends a message to the team that you value its input.
2. **Determine who will facilitate the retrospectives.** Do you have resources inhouse, or will you bring in someone from outside? Only in the rarest of cases will someone from inside the project be the best facilitator; it's better to have someone who is neutral and does not have an important perspective on the project to share. Many organizations are building a cadre of internal retrospective facilitators who can step in on projects.
3. **As you near your delivery dates, schedule the retrospective dates so that all team members have it on their calendars.** It's much more difficult to wait until the project is

over and try to pull everyone back together. Consult your facilitator for the right time to hold the retrospective (usually two to four weeks after the end of the project, though the scheduling varies depending on other constraints). Dedicate enough time — typically one to four days depending on the length, complexity, and size of the project.

4. **Work with your facilitator and administrative staff to select a location and set up other arrangements.**
5. **Attend the event in whatever capacity is appropriate depending on your day-to-day involvement in the project.** You may need to participate only in the opening and closing, or your presence may be important for the duration of the event. Work with the facilitator to determine how actively you should participate. Sometimes it's best when organizational leaders listen more than talk.
6. **Follow up on the outputs of the retrospective.** This involves fulfilling your own commitments and holding others accountable for theirs.

Retrospectives offer an effective tool for well-managed, well-led improvements in project performance — project quality, processes, and customer interaction. With project members determining the appropriate direction of changes, based solidly on their own experience, no one has to go through the time-consuming effort to get buy-in on a desired change. Retrospectives capture the total value of each project, including organizational learning and wisdom as well as product sales or updated, better-functioning systems.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Identified as a standard-setting consultant by clients, an exceptional facilitator by colleagues, and the "best boss ever" by former employees, Diana Larsen works in partnership with leaders of software development projects, IT/IS departments, and other technical groups to strengthen their ability to create and maintain company culture, manage organizational change, and improve project performance. Ms. Larsen offers public and on-site workshops to train retrospective facilitators. She speaks and writes articles drawing on more than 15 years of consulting, facilitation, and management experience, as well as her mastery in many areas of team dynamics, project chartering, project organization, project retrospectives, and organizational change. Ms. Larsen serves on the boards of the AgileAlliance and the Pacific Northwest Software Quality Conference. She is a partner in FutureWorks Consulting, LLC (www.futureworksconsulting.com). She can be reached at dlarsen@futureworksconsulting.com.

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

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