The Pragmatic Programmers

Agile Retrospectives

Second Edition

A Practical Guide
for Catalyzing Team
Learning and Improvement

Esther Derby
Diana Larsen
David Horowitz
edited by Adaobi Obi Tulton

This extract shows the online version of this title, and may contain features (such as hyperlinks and colors) that are not available in the print version.

For more information, or to purchase a paperback or ebook copy, please visit https://www.pragprog.com.

Manage Activities

Every retrospective design includes activities that help teams collaborate on problems or issues. Activities may include any process or exercise that moves the team through to the end. In Part II, Selecting Activities, on page ?, we describe a variety of activities for each phase of a retrospective. In Chapter 10, Retrospectives for Common Scenarios, on page ?, we offer retrospective designs in response to common scenarios that teams tend to face.

As the facilitator, you'll need to introduce each activity, monitor progress, and encourage the team to capture learnings or conclusions. Then you move on to the next activity and so on through the end of the retrospective.

Most people want to know something about the purpose of an activity before they begin. A good introduction provides purpose. Give a broad sense of the territory the team will explore. Hold back on revealing the details of what will happen or specifying what the team will learn. While writing this book, we asked people in our networks to submit stories of retrospectives. We got scores of responses. We noticed that practically everyone who submitted a favorite activity or facilitation technique enjoyed telling us about why it worked well for them and their teams.

Introducing Activities

The first time you use an activity, write a simple script. It will ensure you remember what to say and that you don't garble the instructions or leave something out.

Once you have your script, practice saying it aloud. Saying the words is different from reading them or thinking about them. Listen as you hear yourself give the instruction. Notice where you stumble and where even you can't follow the instructions. Then refine your script and practice again.

Listen to yourself:

- Are your instructions clear?
- Do you state the purpose of the activity?
- Do you give an overview of the activity?
- Do you break the steps down into chunks?

You may not follow the script in the end. In fact, you probably won't. However, preparing and practicing will help you describe each activity clearly and concisely.

Here's a sample introduction for the Timeline activity, which we describe on page ?.

> To understand our iteration, we need to tell the whole story from everyone's perspective. We'll create a timeline that shows events that happened during the project. After we have a timeline as complete as it can be for now, we'll look for interesting patterns and explore puzzles.

This short description tells the team a lot about the territory of the activity. The group will collaborate to "understand our iteration." It lists the steps at a high level. First, "create the timeline." Second, "look for interesting patterns." Third, "explore puzzles." It doesn't give too many details for instruction yet. It doesn't tell your team exactly what the outcome will be. That's for the team to discover.

Most people can't absorb detailed instructions for a multipart activity. Give the details for each part at the last responsible moment, just in time.

For example, when it's time to dive into the Timeline activity previously mentioned, the details of the first steps are as follows: "Let's get into groups of two or three. In your group, brainstorm all the events that took place during the release. An event doesn't have to be a milestone—it can be anything that happened on the project. Write each event on a sticky note." (Notice this works for both in-person and remote team retrospective settings.) After giving the instructions, ask whether anyone has questions about the task. Pause. Slowly count to ten in your head. Someone will have a question—wait for it.

Instructions for Remote Retrospectives

With remote teams, it's even more important to have clear instructions for activities. Give instructions for short chunks of work and ask for questions. Have the instructions written down and available so people can refer to them while they are in breakout rooms.

As the facilitator, you have two tasks during the activity: 1) to be available to answer questions about the activity and 2) to monitor the room.

When you're in the same physical room, the level of "buzz" is a useful indicator of how the group is doing. Even when you don't hear the words, the tone can tell you whether people are engaged, confused, or moving on. If it sounds like there's still lively conversation at the end of a discussion activity, check to see whether people need more time. For quieter activities, like individual writing, increased conversational buzz means the opposite. It tells you that people have stopped writing and started talking to their neighbors. Check in to learn whether the conversation still has relevance to the activity. Then you can decide whether to let it go on or move on to the next part.

Monitoring How the Group Is Doing During Remote Retrospectives

If you're a remote team that utilizes breakout rooms, you have no way to listen to the buzz. Instead, you will use other techniques to gain a sense of how things are going. Watch the movement of virtual sticky notes or other activity to gauge engagement and whether people are done. When the typing becomes less frequent, it's time to move on.

Some platforms allow the moderator to drop into the breakout rooms. This isn't as subtle as walking by and noticing if a group seems stuck or on the wrong track. It's actually rather intrusive and often stops the conversation entirely. Be sure to let people know in advance if you plan to suddenly appear in their breakout room while they're working.

If your platform supports it, remind people they can always raise a virtual hand if they need assistance.

For more tips, see Chapter 11, Retrospectives When the Team Isn't Colocated, on page ?.

Move Through the Diamond

Leading the group through their collective learning and thinking requires a trip (or two) through the "Diamond of Participation" (see *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making [KLTF96]*), which we initially referenced in Chapter 1, Help Your Team Inspect and Adapt, on page ?.

You might recall that Kaner's model says that when any group is dealing with a complex situation where there are no easy answers, they will tend to *diverge*. They will bring in different perspectives, ideas, and opinions. If they are able to work through these differences (Kaner calls this sometimes difficult process the "groan zone"), they will converge, integrating new information and generating new ideas.

The prospect of the groan zone can deter people from divergence. People may stick to what's safe and familiar, in which case the discussion is unlikely to result in deep thinking. Without divergence, you're left with habitual thinking and business as usual. On the other hand, if the team doesn't have a way to converge, they will struggle to reach a decision that all can support.

Most retrospectives take two trips through the "diamond."

First, in the Gather Data phase, the group diverges. They explore different data, perspectives, and responses. When they can absorb different responses and views, they converge on a shared pool of data. Without shared data, the Generate Insights and Decide What To Do phases get "groany" because people have different mental models of what happened.

The group again diverges in the Generate Insights phase as they explore a wide range of possible causes and potential actions. Once the group agrees on a cause or path forward, it converges once again.

The challenge for the facilitator lies in keeping the group engaged with activities that move the group through the diamond.

Manage the Unexpected

Sometimes something unexpected happens and you roll with it. Ruud Rietveld, agile coach at Trailblazers B.V., had chosen activities for each of the five phases of the retrospective. For the Set the Stage phase, he picked an activity that involved choosing and discussing images from a collection he provided.

As the activity began, one team member explained the picture he chose. He had a role in information security that kept him separate from the rest of the team. He said the picture showed that he was unhappy with his contribution to the team. In addition, the situation left him feeling alone.

Ruud realized this activity, which was intended to serve as an easy way into the rest of the meeting, had instead surfaced an important, yet hidden, problem. He decided to abandon his original plan. He shifted his approach to the remainder of the retrospective by picking a focus that was devoted to that team member's contributions and how they affected the whole team.

The team discussed their experiences and insights. They found "good, concrete actions" that would help to integrate this team member's work into the whole team's work. They examined similar solutions for all members of the team and defined a much finer line for when to work separately.

In essence, Ruud threw his other preparations for a well-planned design out the window. As an experienced retrospective leader, he had the flexibility and versatility to replan quickly when the team encountered an unexpected moment for learning. Ruud reflected that shifting the focus to what was going on in the moment had a "much more meaningful impact" than his original plan would have.

Reflecting as You Go

Sometimes it's helpful to reflect on activities within the retrospective. This can help the group identify key points and insights, make connections, and form new ideas. Pay particular attention to check-ins, data-gathering exercises, and interpretation activities.

Start by asking for observable events and sensory input. "What did you see and hear in that last activity?"

Ask how people responded to those events and inputs. "What surprised you about it? Where were you challenged? What made you uncomfortable? When did you feel satisfied with your response? When did you have fun?"

Ask for insights and analysis. "What insight do you have about the activity?" followed by, "How did this activity connect to our retrospective topic?" These questions help people form their ideas and connect the activity to the rest of the design flow.

After you've established the link between the activity and topic, complete the learning cycle. Ask group members how they will apply the insights from their reflections. Consider a question like, "What's one thing you might want to remember for our next step?"

As with the five-phase format, you will gather objective and subjective data, generate insights, and decide what to do.