Agile Retrospectives

Second Edition

A Practical Guide
for Catalyzing Team
Learning and Improvement

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Deal with Emergent Issues

Fidgeting and intense side conversations may signal an issue. Something's bubbling close to the surface, but it's not yet on the table for discussion. Again, ask the group what is going on. Sometimes they will tell you. Other times the issue is more apparent.

In the midst of a retrospective, Diana noticed the manager took a call. This was counter to a department-wide agreement about taking calls in meetings, so the manager's behavior surprised everyone.

Next, the manager left the room. When she came back in, she had a quiet side conversation with one person and then another. Laptops opened. Other team members continued to try to stay with the main topic. But the disruption distracted them too much to keep on track. Diana stopped the discussion and asked, "What's happening?"

Diana paused the retrospective and helped the team discuss their options. The team chose to pause the retrospective, set a timebox for problem-solving in the room, and then resumed the retrospective—all without blame. By naming the issue, she brought it into the open and shifted what could have been a difficult dynamic.

Four Steps for Handling an Emergent Issue Without Blame

When something unexpected comes up, these four steps will help you find a way forward that works for the group.

1. *Notice the behavior.* The very first thing is to notice something is happening. This isn't as easy as it sounds, given all the things a retrospective leader must attend to. It may be someone opening a laptop or a normally engaged team seeming distracted.

2. *Comment on it.* Be careful to use neutral language. If, as in Diana's story, the situation involves a working agreement, remind people of the agreement.

3. *Ask the group what is happening.* They may have a different perspective or some essential information.

4. *Help the team clarify their options.* The options will be different for every situation. It's always a good rule of thumb to have at least three.

It's impossible to predict what sort of situation will arise, but rest assured, sooner or later something surprising will happen.

Gregor Streng, an agile coach, told us he's learned that he must "facilitate the retro for success even if the team takes over…as a Scrum Master, you prepare a retro, then start facilitating it, and then it moves just in a direction you haven't thought at all."

He continued, "This has happened to me quite a few times. The first time I was a little confused. But at the end of the retrospective, the team and I were happy that it went this way because we had valuable outcomes that helped the team. I even thanked the team for going this way and not just 'enjoying the retro show.' For me, this is an indicator of teams that really live agility and use retrospectives as an important part of their work."

Emergent topics may not show up right at the beginning of the retrospective. That's why it helps to keep a few alternative activities in your facilitator's toolkit or metaphorical "back pocket." And be ready to throw things out completely and go with what's most important in the present. Stay alert to the energy of the team and move with it.

And, if you're a participant in the retrospective and become aware of a big disruptor, as the manager in Diana's retrospective did, say something!

Handle Challenging Dynamics

The vast majority of retrospectives go pretty much as planned. If you've chosen activities to equalize participation, you will most likely take on challenging topics in a pleasant way. But sometimes, chaos breaks loose.

Remember, there's a pretty good chance these issues don't have much to do with what's happening in the room but with some other deeper pattern. It's not your job to fix people's issues. If outbursts are the ongoing rule on your team, something else is happening. You will want to attend to those outside the retrospective. Retrospectives aren't appropriate venues to solve every problem. Your human resources representative or manager may be able to offer guidance.

Before you jump in to fix things, notice your own response. While it's easy to focus on comforting one person, you may lose track of the goal and needs of the team. Remember, your primary responsibility centers on healthy interactions for the whole team—not on any particular individual. That doesn't mean ignoring what ss going on with individual emotions. It means dealing with

their emotions in a way that is helpful and respectful to the team and to the individual.

Strategies that have worked for us can work for you. Have a mental picture of how you'll respond. It will give you more options at the moment. Think of the outburst that scares you the most and then mentally rehearse using one of these strategies. Outbursts are unsettling, but they don't have to derail the process. If you think you could never handle interactions like this, remember that it's a skill you can build. Like any other skill, practice helps.

Handling Strong Emotions

In general, handle strong emotions using the same four-step process as you would any other emergent issues—with some slight modifications. Notice what's happening. Comment in a neutral way. For example, "Wow, that was big." Ask, "What's happening for you?" Help clarify options, perhaps by saying, "What would you like to have happen?"

The following are some challenging dynamics we've witnessed while facilitating. Many teams (but not all) consider these behaviors to be disruptive. If it's unclear what is "within bounds" and what isn't, refer to the team's working agreements. If the working agreements don't address these behaviors and they keep popping up, consider running a retrospective on *that* instead.

Tears

For some teams, tears can feel inappropriate at work. For other teams, tears are perfectly acceptable—normal even.

No matter, if you're in person, offer a box of tissues. If you're working with a virtual team, give the team member a bit of time. Show patience. Ask if the group needs a break.

When the person is able to speak, ask, "What is happening for you? Would you feel comfortable sharing it with the group?" Pause. Give them time and understanding. A tearful person often will share a heartfelt (and very relevant) comment about the topic. Those comments may shift the thinking of the whole team.

Remember, tears may feel disruptive, but they also might be exactly what's needed. Sometimes, the best way to get past a difficult situation is to work *through* it. If you sense that's the case, invite the tears. Support the person as they feel their feelings.

Shouting

When someone starts shouting, the rest of the people often stop participating. That makes it unproductive for everyone. Intervene immediately. Hold up one hand as a stop sign and say calmly but forcefully, "Hold it." Then say, "I want to hear what you have to say. I can't when you're shouting. Can you tell us without shouting?" The person may respond, "I'm not shouting!" When someone feels upset or excited, they may not notice their rising vocal volume. They sincerely may not realize it. There's no need to say "Yes, you are." Calling attention to the yelling is usually enough to stop it.

If a team member continues to blame or yell after your intervention, call a break. Breaks provide an all-purpose remedy to many meeting ills. They give you time to think and everyone else time to reset. Talk to the person privately. Let them know how the behavior affects the group. Ask for their agreement to express emotion in a nonthreatening way. If the person is unwilling, ask (don't tell) them to leave. Offer them the option to return when they have more self-control.

Stomping Out

When a team member stomps out or leaves the virtual team room abruptly, let him or her go. Ask the team, "What just happened?" They will have an idea. Ask whether it's possible to continue without the person who left. Most of the time, they'll say they can continue, though they may need to talk about the departure.

If this happens more than once, another issue is at play. Talk to the individual outside the retrospective.

Inappropriate Laughter and Clowning

It's great to have fun in a retrospective and enjoy the team's time for learning together. Yet, people also may use laughter and humor to deflect from a sensitive topic. Notice when the laughter has an edge or when your team has developed a pattern of avoiding a topic. It's time to step in. Make an observation and ask a question: "I've noticed that every time we get near this topic, someone tells a joke. What's happening?" They'll tell you and potentially engage in the topic.

For more on how to handle "elephants in the room," see .

Silence

Outbursts aren't the only emotional cues to manage. Uncharacteristic silence can be a problem, too. When a team that has been voluble goes quiet, something is going on. Again, step in with an observation and a question: "It seems to me that the group is being awfully quiet. There was a lot of energy and conversation earlier. What's going on now?"

Team members may simply feel tired and need a break. Or they may be unsure how to approach an uncomfortable issue. Once you ask the question and wait, someone will figure out how to broach the topic. Then the proverbial dam will burst. In cases like this, your ability to stay comfortable with extended silence will serve you well.

The fact that a team goes quiet may not mean anything. They may be thinking, tired, or merely a quiet group. When the silence is sudden or out of character, it's a clue worth following. You may discover a topic that's trying to emerge.