

Retromat

Run great agile retrospectives!

Turbocharge your brain with more than 140+ activities

Find the perfect activity for your team's situation:
Pick from more than 20 activities for each phase.
Support your team to maximize follow-through.
Help them become the best team they can be!



Corinna Baldauf

Foreword by Diana Larsen

Retromat

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<http://leanpub.com/retromat-activities-for-agile-retrospectives>

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Contents

Foreword	i
About this book	iii
Retrospective Basics	1
Default Retrospective Plan	4
All Activities	7

Foreword

Dear Reader,

To be completely transparent, I will let you know right up front: I've had a long term love affair with this book! I've loved it since its first, web-only iteration several years ago. I loved it when Corinna Baldauf produced the print version and I still love it as an ebook.

Typically, experienced as well as new, retrospective leaders find it difficult to conceive the design for retrospectives, design means creating a flow of group meeting activities. These activities create a meeting that moves through launching, learning, thinking, deciding, and improving. These activities help the team reflect, then make a real difference for the work and the team members. These activities help team members devise a hypothesis about how to improve their collaboration. Or their product quality. Or remove impediments to their work flow. And so on. A well-designed retrospective can make a world of difference for the teams we care about.

Through this book, Corinna has made our design work so much smoother. I turn to the Retromat with each new retrospective I lead. I browse through each chapter. I consider what the new team needs, and which activities will help them best. Her choices give me new ideas. Proceeding from the “Default” plan, through the chapters, she leads us through to retrospective gold. It's a treasure trove!

In every retrospective facilitators workshop I lead, I recommend the Retromat as a primary resource. I'm glad you've found it too.

Diana Larsen

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¹<https://pragprog.com/book/dlret/agile-retrospectives>

Co-author, [Liftoff: Start and Sustain Successful Agile Teams](#)²

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²<https://pragprog.com/book/liftoff/liftoff-second-edition>

³<https://leanpub.com/fiverules>

⁴<http://www.agilefluency.org/>

⁵<http://www.futureworksconsulting.com>

About this book

We start by revisiting the basic structure of retrospectives and looking at a solid default plan.

The main part consists of each and every activity in Retromat - sorted by phase - for your reading pleasure. So that when you find yourself in a tricky situation you can be like “Wait, I know the perfect activity to make progress! Lemme look it up, real quick.”

After the activities I’ve included material that’s useful for scrum masters and other retrospective facilitators about common questions and topics such as remote retrospectives and how to make sure that teams implement action items.

Retrospective Basics

A retrospective is an opportunity to learn and improve. It is time set aside – outside of day-to-day routine – to reflect on past events and behaviors.

That being said, is this your first book about retrospectives? Because it's not a great *first* book. It's an excellent second book, it's just not meant for beginners.

Consider reading “Agile Retrospectives” by Esther Derby and Diana Larsen first. It's how I started and I highly recommend it for beginners!

Okay, where were we? Oh yeah, making sure that this is not your first contact with retrospectives and you're only here for a refresher.

Well then: A retrospective is an opportunity to learn and improve. In its simplest form the team answers 3 questions:

- What worked well?
- What didn't work well?
- What will we do differently from now on?

In none-agile environments retrospectives are sometimes done after a project is finished as a “post mortem” to derive “lessons learned”. Those tend to be long meetings.

In contrast, in agile environments, a retrospective is short and done often (e.g. 90 minutes for a 2-week sprint). Thus the project is still in progress and you can address issues jeopardizing the project's success in time, hopefully keeping it on track.

In Scrum, retrospectives belong to the cast of regular sprint meetings. In Kanban there's a variety of ways to “schedule” retrospectives. In Lean A3's can serve the same purpose.

Who takes part?

“The team” whoever that includes in your context. In Scrum it’s usually the dev team plus product owner and the scrum master facilitates. If you have a specific topic that includes / affects people from outside the team invite them to work on a joint solution.

What does a retrospective look like?

In its simplest form, a bunch of people

- meet
- talk about stuff and
- agree on some actions (that will hopefully improve the situation).

Usually retrospectives are a little more sophisticated than that. Most follow the 5 phases suggested in “Agile Retrospectives“:

Set the stage

Set the goal; Give people time to “arrive” and get into the right mood

Gather data

Help everyone remember; Create a shared pool of information (everybody sees the world differently)

Generate insight

Why did things happen the way they did?; Identify patterns; See the big picture

Decide what to do

Pick a few issues to work on and create concrete action plans of how you’ll address them

Close the retrospective

Clarify follow-up; Appreciations; Clear end; How could the retrospectives improve?

You can support each phase with activities to spark ideas and interaction. This book contains loads of them, more than 20 for each phase.

Vegas-Rule

What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas

To enable candor and high levels of trust, retrospectives have to be confidential. Some facilitators read out the Vegas rule in the beginning to remind everyone.

What is a retrospective NOT?

- 1) Another meeting in which talk is cheap but no change follows
– If the retrospectives don't produce concrete actions or if no one carries them out afterwards, retrospectives are a waste of time.
- 2) A blame game – Retrospectives are not about ass coverage and assigning blame. In fact, some facilitators start their retrospectives by reading out the "Retrospective Prime Directive":

Prime Directive

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. Concentrate on what you will do in the future.
Norm Kerth in "Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Review"

Default Retrospective Plan

Sometimes I'm asked to facilitate a retrospective on short notice and don't have time to plan properly. Then I fall back on plans that are fairly multi-purpose and work in a variety of situations. Here is one such plan for a retrospective of 60 minutes or more. If you don't have a default plan yet, feel free to try this one:

Positive & True (ID #122)

Why: Create a positive vibe and give everyone an opportunity to speak.

How: Ask your neighbor a question that is tailored to get a response that is positive, true and about their own experiences, e.g.

- What have you done really well in the last iteration?
- What is something that makes you really happy?
- What were you most happy about yesterday?

Then your neighbor asks their neighbor on the other side the same question and so on until everyone has answered and asked.

This will give everyone a boost and lead to better results.

Learning Matrix (ID #9) combined with Lean Coffee (ID #51)

Why: Learning Matrix is a great multi-purpose method that has “appreciation for others” built-in. I use it to gather topics and then use Lean Coffee to structure and time box the conversations about these topics. I rely on Lean Coffee a lot!

How: Show a flip chart with 4 quadrants labeled ‘:’, ‘:(’, ‘Idea!’, and ‘Appreciation’. Hand out sticky notes.

- The team members can add their input to any quadrant. One thought per sticky note.
- Go around the team and let everyone put up their stickies on the flipchart. The person also describes their topic in 1 or 2 sentences. Group stickies that are about the same topic.
- Hand out 5 dots for people to vote on the most important issues, the ones they’d like to discuss. They can distribute the dots any way they like, i.e. in extreme cases put all the dots on one topic.
- Order the stickies according to votes.
- Say how much time you set aside for this phase and then explain the rules: “We’ll start with the topic of highest interest. We’ll set a timer for 10 minutes. When the timer beeps, everyone gives a quick thumbs up or down. Majority of thumbs up: The topic gets another 5 minutes. Majority of thumbs down: Start the next topic with 10 minutes on the clock.”
- Stop when the allotted time is over.

Worked Well, Do Differently (ID #39)

Why: Keep track of suggested action items

How: In preparation for the retrospective head 2 flip charts with 'Worked well' and 'Do differently next time' respectively. Write down suggestions for actions that people mention during Lean Coffee. State clearly that these are only suggestions for now. The team will vote on these later.

When all Lean Coffee time is talked up, ask if there are any more suggestions for actions. If so, let them write in silence for a few minutes – 1 idea per index card.. Let everyone read out their notes and post them to the appropriate category. Lead a short discussion on what the top 20% beneficial ideas are. Vote on which action items to try by distributing dots or X's with a marker, e.g. 3 dots for each person to distribute. The top 2 or 3 become your action items.

AHA (ID #60)

Why: Demonstrate the usefulness of retrospectives by asking for learnings.

How: Throw a ball (e.g. koosh ball) around the team to uncover learning experiences. Give out a question at the beginning that people answer when they catch the ball, such as:

- One thing I learned in the last iteration

Depending on the question it might uncover events that are bugging people. If any alarm bells go off, dig a little deeper.

In many situations the above plan will result in a nice, effective retrospective for you and your team. Plus, it's easy to facilitate and well-suited for beginners.

All Activities

In this chapter you find each and every activity from Retromat, ordered by phase.

Each activity has got:

- **title, summary and description**
- **duration** (for a team of 7 people)
 - short -> less than 10 minutes
 - medium -> 10-30 minutes
 - long -> more than 30 minutes
- **team stage** the activity lends itself to (see [Appendix](#) for more info)
 - forming – a group of individuals getting to know the goal and each other
 - storming – when work styles clash
 - norming – resolving differences & committing to a shared goal
 - performing – achieving great things together, having a nice vibe
 - stagnating – team has been together too long, little learning going on
 - adjourning – breaking up the team
- **ID** – so that you can find it in the online Retromat
- **source** – mad props to the activity's inventor

Some activities also have a photo for visual inspiration.

If you ever have to plan a retrospective in minimal time, try the [Quick Reference](#)⁶ with all activity names and summaries, sorted by phase. The password is “retromatRocks”.

⁶<http://finding-marbles.com/retromat-quick-ref/>