The Retrospective Handbook

A guide for agile teams

Patrick Kua

Foreword by Diana Larsen

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About this Sample Book

This sample book contains the full front matter and a few sample sections from the first three chapters in the full edition of the book. The Table of Contents contains only the sections added to this book. The full Table of Contents listing is available on The Retrospective Handbook's home page.

The sections included in this preview give you a feel for what the rest of the book is like. I hope you find it enticing enough to try out the full version which contains over 120 pages of content.

Foreword by Diana Larsen

Over fifteen years ago, Norm Kerth (author of *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews*) asked me to lead a retrospective for a team. He was acting as interim manager for the project which made him ineligible for the role of neutral facilitator - he knew he had opinions about the project and wanted to contribute them. We'd met through a mutual friend, and he had learned that I had experience with meeting facilitation and helping technical teams improve their work processes. I felt honoured that he asked me and curious about his format. He gave me an unpublished manuscript and said, "Read this...you'll be fine." I read it, we designed a three-day meeting, and the resulting retrospective went so well that he included a blow-by-blow description of it in his book.

That was my first introduction to project team retrospectives. It changed the course of my career and my life. Over the last fifteen years, I've collaborated with Norm, Esther Derby, Deborah Lavell, Gerhard Ackermann, Linda Rising, Boris Gloger, Rachel Davies, Charlotte Malther, Ainsley Nies, Josef Scherer, George Dinwiddie, and a host of other excellent retrospective leaders to establish the annual international "Retrospective Facilitators Gathering" and co-authored (with Esther) Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great. The movement to adopt Agile approaches to software development gave teams the opportunity to continuously improve their methods, practices,

processes, and teamwork throughout the project, not just at the end. Esther and I offered workshops in leading Agile retrospectives at the end of iterations and releases to scores of people worldwide, and we weren't the only ones. Retrospectives became an accepted part of the cannon of Agile practices.

Getting to know Patrick Kua was one of the delights associated with the 2007 Retrospective Facilitators Gathering (RFG, for short) in Phoenix, Arizona. Pat brought a high degree of creative energy and enthusiasm to retrospective leadership. I enjoyed hearing about his experiences, his designs, and his innovations for the practice. I began following his blog posts and gained an even greater respect for his skills as an Agile coach. We looked for opportunities to collaborate on conference sessions. Over time, he became a leading thinker and writer about designing and facilitating highly effective retrospectives.

In 2006, when Esther and I published *Agile Retrospectives*, we used the term "retrospective leader" rather than "facilitator" to describe the role. At the time, in general, development team members, team leads, player-coaches, and scrum masters held low opinions of "touchy-feely," "group process," and words like "fluffy bunny" and "facilitator" that accompanied them. Since then, the role of a meeting facilitator and the skill of facilitation have gained recognition as an essential skill for team leaders and team members.

In this book, Pat underscores that awareness. He includes many aspects of retrospective facilitation that

Esther and I left out, delving deeply into preparation and follow through, various types of retrospectives (he calls them flavours), common retrospective smells (to expand into another sense), retrospectives with distributed teams, and how to keep them fresh. He also provides pointers to group process activities and resources for improving one's skills as a facilitator. It is truly a soup-to-nuts compendium of the wisdom he's gained from his experiences.

As Norm introduced me to the format of retrospectives, let Pat introduce you to his perceptive, discriminating, and ingenious take on facilitating retrospectives. And I hope to meet you at an RFG someday!

- Diana Larsen

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co-author, *Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great*

co-author, *Liftoff: Launching Agile Teams & Projects*

Preface

I have fond memories of my first 'agile team' experience, mostly Extreme Programming (XP)-inspired with fortnightly planning sessions, with frequent releases and retrospectives at the end of each iteration. We would stop for an hour each fortnight, celebrate positive aspects, and explore any issues we had at all levels: technical, team and environment. My teammates and I found that we became highly engaged because we could directly influence the way we worked and we could continue experimenting and fine-tuning our work methods as circumstances changed.

We released software into production every single fortnight. I felt so much more productive than I had in a previous job, where I had worked on a large, distributed project for a huge coproration, and had rarely heard people talk about change or improvement. The contrast between these experiences helped me to see how retrospectives create 'safe spaces' and inspired me to want to run and facilitate retrospectives.

In London I met Tim MacKinnon, another XP developer who was passionate about the retrospective practice. On one occasion, because he had no time and knew of my passion for retrospectives, he asked me to facilitate a project retrospective.

I was extremely nervous about being an 'official' facilitator for the first time and I searched desperately for a book to tell me how I could run it successfully. I wanted advice about potential traps and how best to prepare for the upcoming retrospective.

Unfortunately, I found nothing at the time and was thankful when the retrospective went successfully. Participants had raised some tough problems but people left with closure on some issues, a better shared understanding of why certain events had unfolded, and lessons to share with other project teams.

Even though this first retrospective had gone well, I felt that this was largely down to good fortune and still wished that I had had a resource offering practical advice on how to prepare for a variety of retrospective situations.

Hence this book. I hope it serves you well, as the resource I wish had existed when I first started facilitating retrospectives.

Introduction

With more organisations choosing agile methodologies to deliver software, more teams are picking up the practice of agile retrospectives. You may be working on one of these teams already and regularly use agile retrospectives to seek continuous improvement; if not, your team may find the agile retrospective practice beneficial to your work.

The Retrospective Handbook is intended as an aid to running more effective retrospectives and to complement existing books on retrospectives. It is important to use a good variety of activities to make an engaging retrospective, but this handbook intentionally focuses less on listing activities in favour of addressing the practical challenges you are likely to encounter when running retrospectives.

The contents of this book reflect advice I have been asked for time and again by people interested in the retrospective practice. Some questions came from newcomers to the agile retrospective practice, who had problems making retrospectives useful, while other questions came from retrospective facilitators keen to hear alternative approaches to common problems. *The Retrospective Handbook* also contains advice on working with seasoned agile teams, and explores ways of changing the retrospective practice to be even more engaging and insightful.

Some of the questions I answer in this book include:

- What is the Retrospective Prime Directive and why should I care?
- How can I improve how I facilitate retrospectives?

- How important is an independent facilitator?
- How do I run a distributed retrospective effectively?
- What different types of retrospectives do people run?
- What can I do to keep retrospectives fresh?
- How do we make sure that we get results from the retrospective?

The answers to these questions and many more are drawn not only from my own experience with the retrospective practice, helping clients and teams overcome frustrations and puzzles they faced, but also from numerous other retrospective facilitators who have passed on their insights and wisdom. I hope *The Retrospective Handbook* helps you to increase the effectiveness of your retrospectives and enables your team to go from strength to strength for years to come.

1 Retrospective Fundamentals

1.1 A Short History of Retrospectives

Norm Kerth first published his ideas on the retrospective practice in his 2001 book, *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews* [KERTH]. The book describes retrospectives as:

> A ritual gathering of a community at the end of the project to review the events and learn from the experience. No one knows the whole story of a project. Each person has a piece of the story. The retrospective ritual is the collective telling of the story and mining the experience for wisdom.

Kerth's book describes how retrospectives differ from 'Project Post Mortems' and 'Lessons Learnt' sessions with a particular focus on taking positive action and acting as a catalyst for change. At around the same time, a number of authors published the Agile Manifesto[1] as a way of rallying people to adopt lightweight methodologies. These new agile methodologies and approaches made learning and communication primary concerns. One of the principles

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[1]http://agilemanifesto.org/

of the Agile Manifesto aligns very well with the practice of retrospectives:

> At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.

The agile community started to embrace the key idea of the retrospective practice. Agile teams saw that they didn't need to wait until the end of a project to run a retrospective and began running them at the end of each iteration. Instead of running retrospectives every three, six or twelve months, teams ran retrospectives as frequently as every week, or at least every month. By stepping back and reflecting on current situations, teams realised value immediately by applying recommendations whilst the project was in flight, rather than at the end.

The following table highlights practices and principles that align well with the spirit of retrospectives.

Methodology	Practice or Principle
Extreme Programming	Fix XP When It Breaks
Scrum	Sprint Retrospective practice
Crystal Clear	Reflective Improvement
Adaptive SW Development	Learn
Lean SW Development	Amplify Learning
Kanban	Improve Collaboratively
DSDM Atern	Timebox Close-Out
RUP	Adapt the Process

Reflecting over a shorter period of time, one to four weeks instead of three to twelve months changed the nature of these meetings. Kerth wrote about taking several days to fully reflect over a project, but looking back over a significantly shorter period, at the end of an iteration rather than an entire project, reduces the time needed to conduct an agile retrospective. Instead of project retrospectives lasting several days, agile retrospectives only take an hour or two to run. In response to these shorter meetings, sometimes called 'Heartbeat Retrospectives', Esther Derby and Diana Larsen published the *Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great* [DERBY]. This book provided a significant contribution to the retrospective community, providing a more relevant framework for agile teams and an even wider set of exercises for people to try out.

1.2 The Key Questions

More on this in the full version.

1.3 A Simple Framework

More on this in the full version.

1.4 Where to Find Activities

More on this in the full version.

1.5 The Importance of the Prime Directive

More on this in the full version.

1.6 The Right Context for Retrospectives

More on this in the full version.

1.7 Complementary Improvement Practices

More on this in the full version.

2 Preparing for Retrospectives

An agile retrospective is a meeting like any other. Even though it is a relatively short meeting, usually lasting about an hour, I find that most facilitators do not set aside sufficient time from their other tasks to properly prepare for a retrospective. A lack of preparation often results in a disproportionate amount of crucial retrospective time being spent on organising materials, the room, and deciding what activities to run rather than information gathering and getting to the crux of the matter.

2.1 Set Aside Time to Prepare

The effective facilitator sets aside two blocks of preparation time. The first is to decide the purpose of the retrospective; the second is to design an agenda around it, complete with a schedule of anticipated timings.

The purpose of the retrospective is to celebrate success and look for improvements. For a heartbeat retrospective, it makes sense to focus on the events since the last retrospective; normally one or two weeks' time. You may even choose to run a 'Focused Topic Retrospective.' For example, one team I worked on ran two separate retrospectives. One week the retrospective focused on team issues, such as the process of how stories flowed and the interactions between team members. The following week's retrospective had a technical theme, bringing in just the developers to discuss

technical issues surrounding the code, design and build process. Focused Topic Retrospectives are useful but I don't recommend teams running them continually.

An agenda helps a retrospective run more smoothly. An agenda includes the activities you plan to run and their sequence. Draw the agenda on a flip chart and make it visible. Making the agenda visible throughout the retrospective is useful to keep the retrospective focused. Consider how long each activity takes to run and allow enough time for group discussion as well as time for transition between activities. Ensure the accumulated time fits into the overall time you planned for the entire retrospective. Avoid rushing people through conversations or cutting short a retrospective.

2.2 Find an Appropriate Space

More on this in the full version.

2.3 Choose the Right Materials

More on this in the full version.

2.4 Prepare the Space

More on this in the full version.

2.5 Right People, Right Place, Right Time

More on this in the full version.

2.6 A Preparation Checklist

More on this in the full version.

3 Facilitating Retrospectives

A direct contributor to the effectiveness of a retrospective is the quality of the facilitator and how they facilitate the retrospective. In this chapter, I will deal with a number of a issues particularly relevant to facilitating retrospectives over other meetings. If you are unfamiliar or uneasy with facilitating, the next chapter covers advice to help you.

3.1 Independent or Non-Independent

In an ideal world, all team retrospectives would have an independent facilitator to run their retrospectives. A facilitator outside of the team maintains neutrality and prevents discussions and outcomes being unintentionally biased. In reality, finding an external facilitator for agile retrospectives is difficult due to cost or time constraints. Teams may also find they are the only people in their organisation that run retrospectives, making it impossible to find an experienced retrospective facilitator from anywhere else within their organisation.

More on this in the full version.

3.2 Conflict of Interest

More on this in the full version.

3.3 Be Decisive

More on this in the full version.

3.4 Develop Your Facilitation Skills

More on this in the full version.

3.5 Form Effective Actions

More on this in the full version.

3.6 Spread the Retrospective Word

More on this in the full version.