

# 3 Steps to an Effective Retrospective

December 2012

---

## REVAMPING YOUR RETROSPECTIVE

Scrum is a simple framework that includes some specific roles, artifacts and meetings. Scrum teams often implement the Daily Stand-Up, Sprint Planning and the Review. And then comes the Retrospective. What's the purpose? What's it supposed to be? Is your team wondering why they bother holding a retrospective?

Perhaps your Retrospective has become ineffective, perfunctory or stale. Rather than abandoning the practice, consider revitalizing it. Here's why.

## WHY IS THE RETRO IMPORTANT?

### The How

The **Sprint Retrospective** is the opportunity to inspect and adapt the Team's *process*. It's a time boxed one- to three-hour meeting (depending on the length of your Sprint) facilitated by the Scrum Master at which the complete Team discusses the just-concluded Sprint and determines what could be changed that might make the next Sprint more enjoyable or productive.

Sometimes Teams skip the Sprint Retrospective. That's unfortunate, because it's the primary method for the Team to discover and implement potential improvements in the way the Team functions. It's an opportunity for the Team to discuss what's working and what's not working, and agree on changes to try. The Team and Scrum Master need to be present. The Product Owner is welcome but not required to attend. Sometimes the Scrum Master can act as an effective facilitator for the Retrospective, but it may be better to find a neutral outsider to facilitate the meeting. A good approach is for Scrum Masters to facilitate each others' retrospectives, which enables cross-pollination among Teams.



### The Why

There are many techniques for conducting a Sprint Retrospective, and the book *Agile Retrospectives* (Derby, Larsen 2006) provides a useful catalogue of techniques. A simple way to structure the discussion is to draw two columns on a whiteboard, labeled "What's Working Well" and "What Could Work Better" – and then go around the room, with each person adding one or more items to either list. As items are repeated, check marks are added next to them, so the common items become clear. Then the Team looks for underlying causes, and agrees on one improvement for the following sprint with acceptance tests built in, along with a commitment to review the results at the next Sprint Retrospective.

## WHY ISN'T YOUR RETRO WORKING?

Over the course of time some Scrum practices begin to slip, or the meeting has become perfunctory not effective. Let's look at how you got here through the frame of the usual suspects for an ineffective Retrospective.

### The Usual Suspects

- "The whole team thinks it's a waste of time."
- "Retrospectives aren't valuable since we don't have any impediments."
- "Maybe if the Scrum Guide said more about how to improve..."
- "The Retrospective is just too hard."
- "We do it but it doesn't have an impact."
- "It's shown us that Scrum isn't really working."

### The Reality

What brought you to this point? Yes, retrospectives are hard because we have to be introspective and question the status quo. But they are invaluable. The compelling information we get from these excuses is what it tells us about the team's underlying dysfunctions.

1. "The whole team thinks it's a waste of time." Ask, why does the team think it's a waste of time? More likely than not, the meeting isn't being managed effectively and the outcome of the meeting doesn't result in change or action.
2. "We don't have any impediments." A team that tells you they don't have any impediments probably has a pretty big impediment that is hard to face, like a lack of trust between team members or fear of conflict.
3. "Tell me what to do, Scrum Guide!" Having a conversation like the Retrospective in a vacuum is onerous! Make it easier to share and be vulnerable! The Scrum Guide doesn't say much about how to have the meeting, but that does not mean that the team or Scrum Master can't be creative.
4. "It's too hard." Some team impediments are big. Too big to solve in one meeting. It's important to make meaningful progress and keep the momentum going each Sprint, and this is most easily done by breaking down issues into something that can be accomplished and has a clear definition of done.
5. "It doesn't have an impact." Often, teams are plugging along and meeting an acceptable velocity. Scrum is meant to produce better products faster, with a steady increase in velocity. If your team has flat-lined, chances are your Retrospective isn't getting to the root cause of some of your big impediments.
6. "All we see is that Scrum isn't working." The Scrum framework will quickly reveal weaknesses, in the team and in the organization. Scrum does not solve the problems; it makes them painfully visible, and provides a framework for people to explore ways to resolve them in short cycles and with small improvement experiments.

## TAKE CORRECTIVE ACTION

### Step 1

If your Retrospectives aren't resulting in increased velocity, name it. Then get the Team to explore root causes. Only a minority of Scrum teams achieve the hyper-productive state. This is because most teams fail to identify and remove impediments and fail to self-organize to improve performance.

### Step 2

Make the case for why the Retrospective is important. Scrum is about continuous improvement. If you're not routinely capturing opportunities for improvement and taking action to do so, you're losing your competitive edge.

### Step 3

Adopt a new practice to rejuvenate your Retrospectives. Sometimes it's as easy as changing the way the question is asked and the **Happiness Metric** is a great way to do that.

The Happiness Metric is a simple tool used to focus your Retrospective and collect actionable information. It works like this:

#### Ask each Team member:

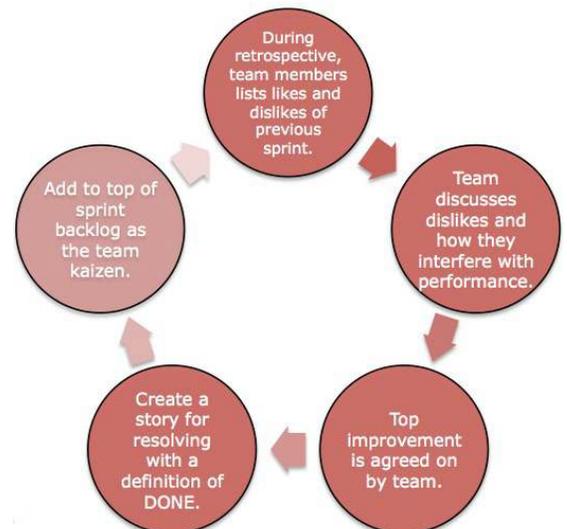
1. On a scale of 1-5, how happy are you with your role in the company?
2. On the same scale, how happy are you with the company?
3. What specifically increased your happiness last Sprint?
4. What specifically decreased your happiness last Sprint?
5. What would increase your happiness for next Sprint?

#### Ask the Team:

1. What would make the team as a whole happier in the next sprint?
2. Identify the top process improvement or kaizen (a Japanese business philosophy of continuous improvement of working practices, personal efficiency, etc. Japanese, literally 'improvement').
3. Put the Kaizen in the Sprint Backlog with quantitative acceptance tests.

#### Just Do It

The Retrospective helps the Team inspect and adapt each cycle. It's the mechanism for harnessing the visibility Scrum



provides to create opportunities for improvement and real results. By focusing on your Retrospective, you'll increase velocity, finish early, and accelerate faster. Try it. If it doesn't work this time, you always have the next Sprint.