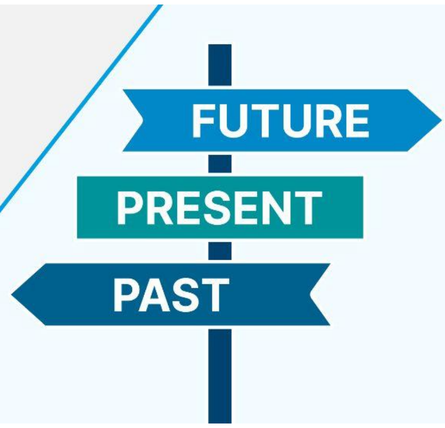
Guidelines for the retrospective facilitator

Introduction

This document is intended primarily for retrospective facilitators. The guidelines describe the mechanics of a retrospective and lay important emphases on the controllability of the overall dynamics of a retrospective and its goals. A retrospective should have certain boundaries set by the managers of the project, product, or company. The facilitator should consider the interests of both sides — the team and the management. He/she should adhere to the following principle: ***the state of the team should not turn for the worse after the retrospective.***



In Agile teams, where the role of a facilitator can be played by any team member, such a document can be provided to all retrospective participants, because each of them can ever become a facilitator (this decision is usually made by the management of the project, product, or even the company).

The document can be extremely useful for the management of the project, product, or company. **It will allow comprehending the process of conducting a retrospective from the point of view of management**, will show important emphases, and will also allow conducting the retrospective more smoothly and synchronously.

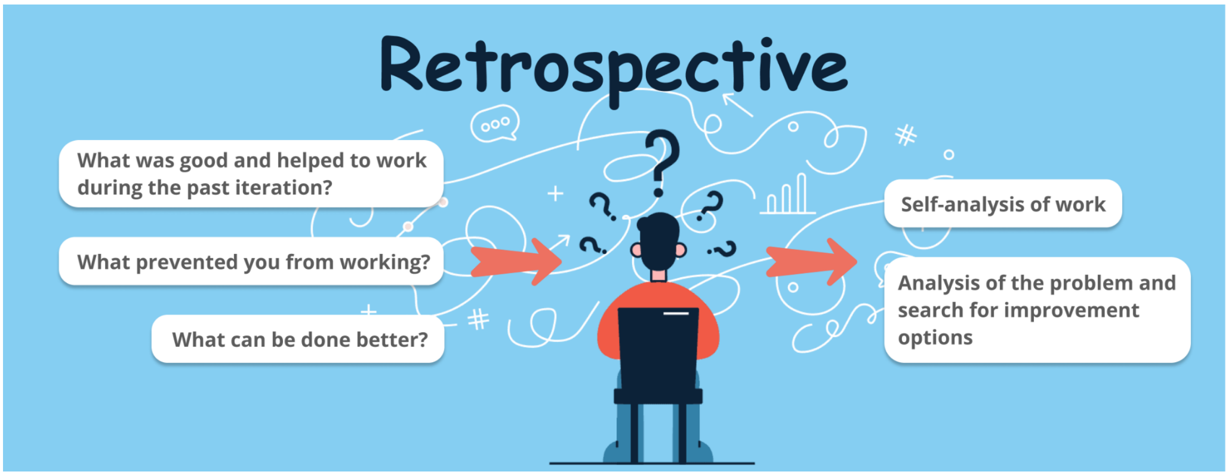
The management of the project, product, or company should consider the following as advice: forget a little about their roles during the retrospective, try not to use the usual management techniques, and be part of the team. **But it is obvious that certain topics are subject to moderation — it is already the experience of the retrospective facilitator and,** in general, the experience of the team.

WITH THIS DOCUMENT YOU WILL:

- comprehend the retrospective process in terms of management;
- highlight important accents and priorities;
- improve the process of holding a retrospective, make it smoother and more synchronous.

How the facilitator should prepare for the retrospective

It is advisable to inform the team about the retrospective at least 2-3 days before it is held, so that the guys have time to think about what they should talk about at the retrospective.

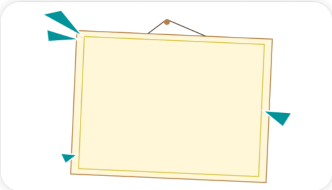


When announcing a retrospective, the team should be made aware of the following:

1. **Timing of the retrospective** — to what period of time the retrospective is devoted: to the last sprint, to the entire period of time from the previous retrospective, or without indicating the timing (when the facilitator just wants to comprehend the current state, make an assessment, it is also relevant for a visiting facilitator), etc.

2. **The topic, focus, directivity of the retrospective** — what the retrospective is devoted to. Initially, a retrospective is a way to refer to the available experience, change something and become better. As a rule, there are two types of retrospectives:
   a. ***General*** — каждый может писать о чём угодно. К примеру, это может быть обсуждение событий на проекте за последние 1-6 месяцев.
   b. ***Specific*** — a specific stream or situation is discussed. For example, delivery failures, regular bugs on the project, unhealthy atmosphere on the project, etc.

The following accessories are needed to conduct a retrospective:

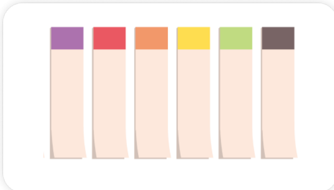


1. **Corkboard** (its dimensions should allow placing all cards, sometimes there are many of them). A few boards may be required.

2. Enough **paper/stickers** — 15 x (team size).

3. Enough **thumbtacks/pins**.

4. **Sticky memo notes** in two colors required for the following activities:



   a. Writing down issues that require additional deployment/elaboration (for example, only blue color is used for questions).
   b. Voting for specific Action Items by team members. 3 of each color x (team size) are enough.

Short retrospective rules

(can be printed and handed out before the beginning)

1. **The basic retrospective presupposes card collection in three stages** (by default, the number of cards at each stage is not limited, however limits can be set, for example, one team member may use 3 or 5 cards):
   a. «+» on the card is used if something is ok.
   b. «-» on the card is used if something could be better.
   c. **Action Items are specific proposals regarding changes.**
   d. **In an expanded retrospective**, the following can be added to the basic stages (Like, Dislike, Action Items):
      i. Conclusions reached by the team members are marked with «!».
      ii. Questions that the team has (to the team, to colleagues, to everyone) are marked with «?».

2. After cards accumulate, **voting for Action Items**, which the team undertakes to implement by the next retrospective, is held for each of the stages. **There are usually 3 votes from each voter, no more than 1 vote per Action Item.**

3. **Each stage lasts 1.5-2 minutes**, after which the cards are handed over to the facilitator. **Then the facilitator reads out all the cards and sorts them into groups** (infrastructure, organizational, testing, etc. — this is necessary for ease of perception).

4. **Everyone should understand what the author of the card meant.** These can be general events that occurred over the last 1-6 months or a specific stream: for example, an unhealthy atmosphere within the team or too many bugs. When commenting/handling cards for each stage, it is important to voice/find out the context of the card together, as this has a significant impact on the assessment of Action Items.

5. **The name is always put on the card, and the card is marked with one of the abovementioned symbols (+, -, !, ?).** Anonymous cards are allowed (it is useful when the employee wants to share a thought, but does not want to give his/her name). **In general, the retrospective facilitator and the management are responsible for the possibility to remain anonymous** (it is advisable to decide on this issue in advance and not allow an imbalance towards anonymity, this should be an exception, but not a rule). Also, the facilitator focuses on his/her intuition when considering/reading the cards: is it worth reading out too sharp/incorrect/unethical questions? Sometimes the facilitator can tell the team that this card will be considered separately, but he/she shouldn't abuse this method. The team should feel the openness of the management.

6. **It is prohibited to go into personals.** It is allowed to talk about an action or an act, but it is not allowed to talk about a person. The facilitator should prohibit making personal remarks. Let's consider the following example:
   a. It is wrong to say: «*Developer Vasya regularly screws up and sends raw tasks for testing.*».
   b. It is correct to say: «*The developer should send only working functionality without critical bugs for testing (example: «..... » feature by Vasya)*».

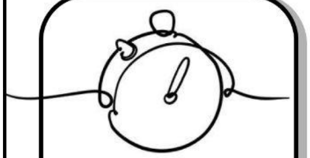
   Here it is wrong to give an assessment with the word «*screws up*». In this case, it is focused on the fact that the person is bad because he/she does something bad. The phrase "*Vasya screws up*» is perceived as «*Vasya is bad*». And the phrase «*should send*» focuses our attention on how it should be, not on the individual.

RETROSPECTIVE

JazzTeam

1. The basic retrospective presupposes card collection in **three stages** (the number of cards at each stage is not limited, however limits can be set, for example, one team member may use 3 or 5 cards):

2. At the end of each stage the facilitator reads out all the cards and sorts them into groups (infrastructure, organizational, testing, etc.).



each stage lasts

1.5-2 min

a «+» on the card is used for Like

b «-» on the card is used if something could be better

c Action Items – specific proposals regarding changes

RULE

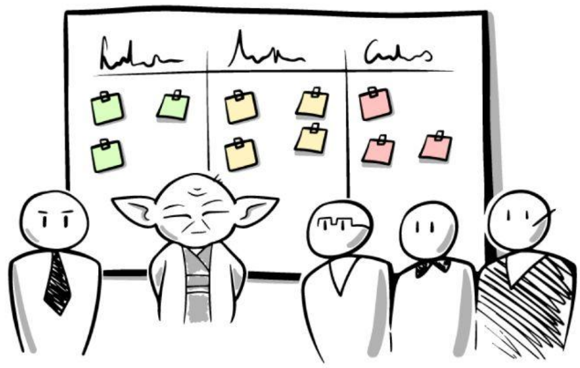
The name is always put on the card, and the card is marked with one of the abovementioned symbols (**+, -, !, ?**).

3. Then voting for the **Action Items** that the team undertakes to complete by the next retrospective is carried out. There are usually **3 votes** from each voter, no more than 1 vote per Action Item.

! *It is extremely important to draw up clearly the answer on the card to make the idea clear to everyone. If there is a lack of understanding among the team members, they should be worked out and the context should be explained.*

RULE

It is prohibited to go into personals.
It is allowed to talk about an action or an act, but it is not allowed to talk about a person.



IT IS WRONG TO SAY:

Developer Vasya regularly screws up and sends raw tasks for testing.

IT IS CORRECT TO SAY:

The developer should send only working functionality without critical bugs for testing (example: «....» feature by Vasya).

You can download this image in good quality (for example, for printing) at:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/18o8tpH10asATI62r2jE8osEcpihLnc9y/view?usp=sharing

Conducting a retrospective

The role of the facilitator includes the following stages: opening, conducting and closing the retrospective, reminding about the rules, facilitating the event, considering all interests, creating a favorable atmosphere for the event, setting the stage for future retrospectives.

For more information, see Course of the retrospective.

- ### Collecting and grouping cards

After each card collection stage, in a couple of minutes all cards are handed over to the facilitator. He/she **pins** them **down** to the board (we recommend asking someone for help), simultaneously **reads** the contents of the card to the whole team and **preliminarily groups cards** on the board. If a retrospective participant has questions or can't understand something, the facilitator can further explain the context of the card after its author clarifies what he/she meant.

Grouping is necessary to show that some tasks are given much more attention. And also to make it clear to the whole team which groups were mentioned. If there are 20-30 cards, their content becomes blurred. Groups allow seeing the picture in a consistent manner.

- ### Marking cards with memo notes for deeper analysis

When grouping and reading the cards, the facilitator can use memo notes of a certain color to **mark issues** that need further elaboration:

1. Sometimes it is very difficult to quickly understand the context of the card on the go. Or it takes time to get a deeper understanding of what the team member meant.
2. Sometimes retrospective participants are embarrassed or for some reason have troubles with expressing the idea.
3. Sometimes the facilitator feels or understands that it is better to have an additional conversation with the employee on a specific occasion for ethical reasons in order to better understand the situation or context.

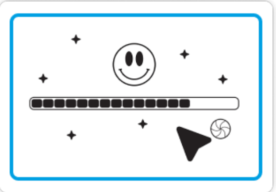
In such cases, it is acceptable to simply mark the card with a memo note of a predetermined color and explain to the team that this issue will be further elaborated.

It is critical to capture the list of issues that need additional elaboration after the retrospective ends. Before the next retrospective, it is really worthwhile to describe the context in detail and provide the team with the results.

Unobvious but crucial role of the facilitator in a retrospective. Controlling the state of team's consciousness during the retrospective.

It is important to understand that the facilitator, in addition to formally following the process, **creates a mood for the entire process**. Probably jokes, maybe promotes positive, open communication, **creates a supportive and relaxed atmosphere**. He/she can gently and carefully stop unproductive communications and criticism. **He/she can also carefully stop the negativity expressed by the founder or top managers**, especially in cases when the team accumulated negative vibes, misunderstandings or if the top managers use retrospectives to direct their negative emotions outward and press against the team.

It is important to understand that an open, relaxed atmosphere during the retrospective generally contributes to the following:

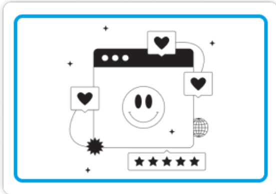


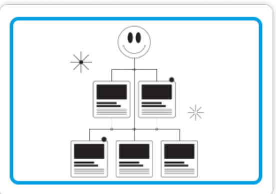
1. Relieving the stress accumulated by the team.

2. Drawing a meaningful line between different stages of the project.

3. The real creative state of the team, which allows generating strong ideas.

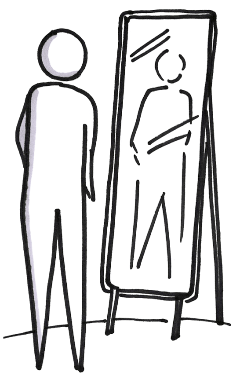
4. Creating an atmosphere of transparency, trust, which in turn allows the management, the founder to make a realistic, honest assessment of the team's state. This assessment can be extremely negative, **but it is realism that makes it possible to make right decisions later.**





5. Team members also have the **feeling of being involved in the project**. The feeling that they mean a lot. The feeling that they can influence the project. **Among other things, this makes it possible to combat learned helplessness.**

Consideration of the company's interests by the facilitator



The facilitator should feel very well about the context of the team and the tasks of the retrospective.

Sometimes it is enough to conduct a retrospective in a constructive way in a calm atmosphere.

Sometimes it is important to understand if there is toxicity in the team and be ready to stop its manifestations.

Group dynamics arises during the retrospective. It needs to be adjusted, monitored and directed into a meaningful activity.

We can say that the **role of a competent facilitator during the retrospective needs to be learned**, that not everyone is able to be a facilitator who can bring harmony. Both intuition and the facilitator’s soft power are important in this role.

Taking into account the interests of the founders, the owners, at the same time creating the atmosphere of democracy, adding elements of the game, and generating a simple mood for relieving the team is an art.

Course of the retrospective

Introduction

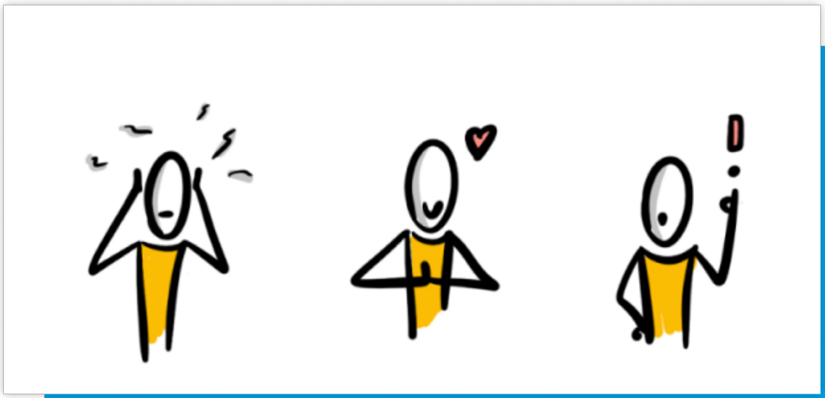
The facilitator at the beginning of the retrospective:

1. **Closes all issues related to the previous retrospective.**
2. Briefly explains the stages of the retrospective.
3. Reminds of the rules (if necessary, the rules can be attached as separate sheets to the corkboard or handed out to all retrospective participants).
4. Indicates important events or situations, reveals the context of the retrospective (it depends on the specific circumstances and needs of the product, the founder, the team). So, the facilitator sets the focus and direction of the retrospective. For example, if it is needed to conduct a retrospective that should include feedback on the latest release, then the facilitator can say: «Since the last retrospective we have made a release and it would be great to reflect this event today.».

Demonstration of previous retrospective results

It is extremely important to create an atmosphere of trust, to make team members understand that the retrospective really changes the project and team, that really everyone can influence the future: this develops responsibility and thinking of team members.

To gain credibility, it is critical to process the results of the past retrospective in a timely manner. This also applies to the cards that the facilitator chose for a detailed study. And this applies especially to Action Items, for which the team voted. They must be completed. The whole team, including the founder and top management, should say clearly, approve that the Action Items should be completed. So, Action Items become part of the team's backlog.



Thus, before the beginning of the retrospective or in advance (through a separate meeting or a detailed letter sent to the team), the facilitator reports on the previous retrospective in the following format: these are the results of an additional detailed study of the cards that the facilitator outlined during the last iteration. And here are the results of the winning Action Items completed by the team.

We recommend being fair-minded when assessing whether the Action Items are fully completed. It is also nice to keep a history: whether the team copes with the Action Items. If not, perhaps it is better to take fewer Action Items for implementation.

There are different strategies for dealing with the results of additional detailed card research.

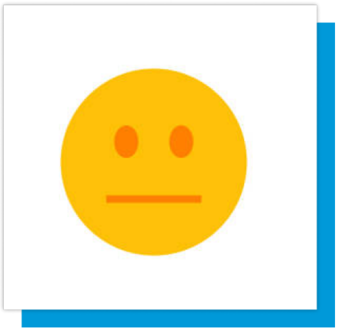
Here are some of them:

- Voicing over the results. If anyone is interested in these results, the team will push them out for handling again during the retrospective.
- Perhaps the project manager has already managed to handle them, discuss them with the management, and nothing else is required.
- The facilitator may also propose to take them into account during voting.
- At the introductory stage, the facilitator can discuss each such card with the team and jointly decide how to proceed.

Stage 1. Like (+)

At this stage, each team member writes on the cards (each item is a separate card) what he/she likes about what they did, began to do or stopped doing in the period that the retrospective covers. That is, it is an opportunity to emphasize and highlight what the team member likes about the team's work. It takes **two minutes**.

Stage 2. Dislike (-)



At this point, each team member writes on the card what he/she **does not** like about what they did, began to do or stopped doing recently. That is, it is an opportunity to highlight what the team member **does NOT** like about the team's work.

Note: if the team is prone to toxicity or conflicts, it is highly desirable to remind them that it is prohibited to go into personals.

Additional possible stages

Conclusions (!)

At this stage, the team members talk about the conclusions that they made during a given period of time. These may be some insights, cool ideas about processes, conclusions that it is better to abandon or start using certain practices.

This stage is distinguished by the fewest cards.

In some ways, this stage overlaps Stage 3. Action Items.

Questions (?)

Team members can ask questions related to topics they are interested in or don't understand.

The facilitator should be careful when communicating the questions, some questions may need to be answered in person. The facilitator should try not to make the retrospective a source of demotivation.

Stage 3. Action Items

By the decision of the facilitator, cards from these stages can also participate in voting on Action Items. It is advisable to decide this in advance. Additional stages make the retrospective longer, but also give more informality, and bring some new ideas.

★ Write the cards

At this point, each team member writes on a card what they think it's time to start doing or stop doing. So, it is an opportunity to say what and how should be changed in work.

★ Pin down the cards

After two minutes, all cards are given to the facilitator. He/she pins them down to the board at the same time commenting (i.e. gives quick feedback, clarifies, emphasizes something, etc.) and preliminarily grouping them on the board (when grouping, it becomes clear that some tasks are paid much more attention, and this is visible on the board).

★ Card assessment and team voting

In addition, the facilitator can use memo notes to mark issues that need deeper elaboration.

After pinning down the Action Items, each attendee is given three memo notes that they can use to vote for a particular Action Item. **It is allowed to use only one vote per Action Item.**

After voting, winning cards are selected. These cards become tasks for the team until the next retrospective (it is desirable to clearly outline the deadline). The rest of the Action Items can be done in parallel, but they are not mandatory for working out and completing, they should simply be recorded for analysis by interested team members.

The winning cards must be thoroughly studied, worked out by the entire team as part of the planned work on the tasks from the backlog. A solution must be implemented. If voting results are clearly visible, the facilitator can immediately announce which cards won. If it is not so obvious, then immediately after the retrospective it is necessary to analyze and report on them later.

By default, **5 winning cards** are selected (but a decision can be made on a different number, for example, 3). The winners enter the backlog of the team.

Conclusion

After voting, the facilitator sums up the retrospective.

He/she can draw the team's attention to the following things:

- What groups of cards are there and what their impact is. The team's thoughts are concentrated on one or two topics or the front is wide enough. Whether there are obviously problematic points or not.

➔ The relationship between technical and non-technical things. What the team needs most of all.
➔ Absence/presence of toxicity and transparency during the discussion. Here the facilitator on the one hand has to show delicacy, and on the other hand to give the team impetus to development in this direction.
➔ Thank the team, give them the opportunity to have fun. It is acceptable to initiate applause for each other. To create a relaxed and joking atmosphere.

Processing of retrospective results

At the end of the retrospective, photos of the retrospective board are taken. These photos are structured into the retrospective collection.

A file with processed retrospective results is also created in the collection.

The retrospective results file may contain the following sections:

1. **Photos**
   a. General photo of the retrospective board (including all parts).
   b. Photo «Like».
   c. Photo «What could be better».
   d. Action Items photo.

2. **List of tasks to be completed based on the results of the retrospective (voting winners)**

Action Item (Author)	Number of voices	Result of elaboration

3. **List of Action Items that did not become winners. They just have to be kept in mind**

Action Item (Author)	Number of voices	Comment

4. List of tasks to be studied in detail (highlighted with memo notes of a separate color by the retrospective facilitator as tasks that need additional coverage)

Example of wording for a task that needs detailed study:
Let's choose another strategy of branching. (suggested by Petr Ivanov).

Detailed strategy advice

The result of the study can be just a detailed comment of Petr Ivanov on the subject of his proposal. This comment can be recorded only according to Ivanov.
If the topic is really important or very extensive, the facilitator can ask all team members to write their opinion in the retrospective processing document.

An example of the strategy of branching can include both a detailed, clear, deep vision of Petr, and comments from all the lead engineers of the company. This form of wording will surely help the management to correctly understand Ivanov's idea and make the right decision.

Advice for people responsible for elaboration

It is permissible that the team selects people responsible for in-depth study of certain issues. They will be responsible for an in-depth interview with the card's author. More than one communication with different team members may be required.

Important notes on elaboration

Very often tasks that need additional elaboration give rise to additional tasks in the backlog of technical debts. Often, the results of the analysis are useful for top managers in strategic planning. The facilitator of the retrospective monitors the degree of issues elaboration.