Retrospectives
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Throughout the life of every meeting, milestone or project, many things happen (or don’t happen) that we can learn from. Sometimes things go well and we can learn how or why they went so well, so we can replicate that in the future. Sometimes things don’t go so well and we can learn what we can do differently to improve. Some participants may have learned something that others may have missed. Some participants may be puzzled about why or how some things may have happened. Each person has a piece of the story, and many of these pieces overlap. No single participant has complete knowledge of the entire story. The purpose of a retrospective is to reflect on a team’s experience in a structured, open forum for the purpose of improving effectiveness in the future. In a retrospective we want to learn from the situation, learn from each other, decide what actions to take and what new expectations we have. In other words, to tightly couple our learning with action.

A retrospective can be done at any time and in a variety of formats. The common theme remains that the people who were involved in a specific situation take time to reflect on what occurred, create a shared story, and identify actions they can take to make improvements. A common method to do a short retrospective is the plus/delta. This simply takes 10 minutes at the end of every meeting. On a project, an hour to an hour and a half can be scheduled every week or two or one can be done at end of every milestone and the project end. One time for retrospectives that is often overlooked is when a team experiences a specific breakdown. Taking time to do a retrospective when breakdowns occur often leads to important discoveries.

In preparing for a retrospective, participants should gather their data for their piece of the story. Participants will share and discuss their data and accounts with others during the retrospective. The facilitator of a retrospective must be able to maintain a neutral position and a positive, reflective tone. We want to obtain the full benefit of a variety of perspectives without falling into blame or irresponsible complaining. The ideal results are increased mutual understanding and trust and identified actions, changes, or adjustments that will lead to improvements.