

Putting the Fun Back In Your Retrospectives

Overview

Retrospectives are a key mechanism of a continuously improving process. However it is a challenge to implement them well. Many are poorly facilitated and other just downright dull. It doesn't have to be this way. Retrospectives can be a time for celebration, a time for fun and a time for team-building.

In this workshop we introduce some of the techniques Rally coaches use to put the fun back in the retrospective including: Goldilocks and the Three Bears, The Break-Up Letter, Draw Me a Picture, Captions, Futurespectives, 5 Whys, Holding a Movie Conversation and Circle Celebration.

Retrospectives are not fun when are not well facilitated and they don't result in any improvements.

There are excellent texts on helping you improve your retrospective facilitation, we recommend:

- *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews* by Norm Kerth
- *Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great* by Esther Derby and Diana Larsen
- *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace* by R. Brian Stanfield
- *Collaboration Explained: Facilitation Skills for Software Project Leaders* by Jean Tabaka

Some of our exercises reinforce or teach techniques described in the books above. Even if your retrospectives are well facilitated, any human being is going to get bored after following the same process every 2 weeks. Don't get stuck in a rut with your retrospectives, change things up a bit, dare to be different.

Hopefully some of the techniques below are a welcome departure from the same old routine.

Captions

A collaborative and safe way to share feelings. Readouts can be hilarious. A fun game to play any time. Great to close out a long day. A nice change if monotony has set in.

Detailed Instructions

Setup

- Divide up the index cards so that each player has one card for every person in the table group
- Number each card sequentially - write in a corner, as small as possible but legibly

Table groups with even number of people start with a picture:

1. Think about something notable since Agile entered your life. On card #1 draw a picture to illustrate
2. Pass the deck to the person on your right
3. Once you have received a deck from the person on your left, study the picture they drew on card #1
4. Place card #1 at the back of the deck (still face up), if you have 6 players this should be behind card #6
5. On card #2 write a caption describing your interpretation of the picture
6. Pass the deck to the person on your right
7. Once you have received a deck from the person to your left, read the caption on the top (should be card #2)
8. Place card #2 at the back of the deck
9. On card #3 draw a picture that illustrates the caption you just read
10. Continue at step 2 until all cards have content and each deck arrives back at their starting points

Table groups with an odd number of people start with a caption:

1. Think about something notable since Agile entered your life. On card #1 write a short caption to communicate that
2. Pass the deck to the person on your right
3. Once you have received a deck from the person on your left, read the caption on card #1
4. Place card #1 at the back of the deck (still face up), if you have 7 players this should be behind card #7
5. On card #2 draw a picture illustrating the caption you just read
6. Pass the deck to the person on your right
7. Once you have received a deck from the person on your left, study the picture they drew on card #2
8. Place card #2 at the back of the deck
9. On card #3 write a caption describing your interpretation of the picture
10. Continue at step 2 until all cards have content and each deck arrives back at their starting points

Readout

Once all decks are back in the hands of their originators it's time for readout. Take turns laying your deck out and sharing with the others.

Thanks to Rally Coach Aaron Sanders for introducing this technique.

Futurespectives

Participants imagine themselves at a moment in the future reflecting on the events that happened but have yet to occur in the present. Completely changes the dynamics of the retrospective from reflection of the past into one of imagining the future. Use it to shake things up a little and to get teams thinking about a future filled with possibility.

Setting the Stage

It is August 2014. NASA's New Horizons spacecraft has crossed the orbit of Neptune, China has put a man on the moon, the new World Trade Center has just been completed and Scotland is still celebrating winning the World Cup. We are gathered together at Agile 2014.

Gathering Data

It is August 2014 you are attending the Agile Conference. Think about the state of the Agile community and the significant events that immediately preceded it.

Your facilitator will guide you through the following steps.

On a Post-it note write the characteristics of the Agile community in 2014 (one characteristic per Post-it note).

On a Post-it note write the significant events that occurred in 2013 that contributed to the current state (remember we are in 2014).

On a Post-it note write the significant events that occurred in 2012 that contributed to the state in 2013.

On a Post-it note write the significant events that occurred in 2011 that contributed to the state in 2012.

On a Post-it note write the one crazy idea that influenced things?

Generating Insights

Think about the key turning points. What were they? Place a green dot on the Post-it notes that you think capture the key turning points (limit 2 dots per person).

Think about the surprises. What is most unlikely but should happen? Place a red dot on the Post-it note that you think was the biggest surprise (limit 1 dot per person).

What implications does this have for what we should do tomorrow?

The Goldilocks Retrospective

A fun way to introduce the practices of a timeline retrospective. The objective is to introduce the basic stages of a retrospective (gather information; gain insight; agree action) through a practical example.

Preparation

- Choose a facilitator for the exercise
- Make sure everybody has a Sharpie and access to Post-it notes
- Create a space to layout the timeline. Space permitting this would ideally be a butcher paper on the wall. Today this will probably be your table.

Setting the Stage

- Describe the Goldilocks fairy story if anyone does not know it.
- The facilitator welcomes everybody:
“Fellow bears we are all aware of what happened on that fateful day on Tuesday August 1st, 2012. We are here today to reflect on the events of that day, and find ways to improve our environment and lives based on thinking about the events that happened recently to our fellow bears.”

Gathering Data

- Get the group to silently brainstorm onto Post-It notes the events of the story (one on each note).
- Create a space to layout a timeline (ideally this would be a wall) but here at Agile 2011 this will be your table
- Participants read out their events and put them on the timeline. If there are any duplicates they can just discard them.

Ranking

- Give everyone stickers for Dot Voting. Usually use 3 each or 5 for smaller groups for this exercise.
- Invite people to put their stickers on the events they felt strongly about. Yes you can use more than one sticker on a Post-It if you feel strongly about it. We then create a prioritized list of items to discuss based on the Post-Its with the most stickers.

Generating Insights

- Invite the group to talk about why they feel strongly about the highest priority item.

Decide What To Do

- Invite the group to identify actions for the highest priority item. If these actions are too large or undefined then put them in 'long term' and ask for first steps.
- Work down the prioritization list until you run out of time.
- Re-run the timeline as if the actions have happened to see how the story has changed.

Thanks to Agile Coach and Partner Dr. Sallyan Freudenberg for introducing this technique.

Retrospecting with the 5 Why's

(adapted from Gamestorming: A Playbook for Innovators, Rulebreakers, and Change Makers by Dave Gray, Sunni Brown and James Macanuffo, p141-143)

Situation

Sometimes you have a huge, obvious symptom that doesn't have an obvious solution, and the team needs to spend time focused on the specific issue. However, many retrospective approaches are geared towards discovering issues and teasing out ways in which a team can take action. What is needed is an effective way to collaboratively drill deeply into the causes of a single issue.

Purpose

Collect the perspectives across the team into a shared understanding of the causes behind a single issue. While typically applied against problems and issues, the technique can also be used to discover what led a team to achieve exceptional success in one area.

Approach

Individually:

Capture a statement that summarizes the issue at hand in a clear, concise, well-understood manner.

Display this statement at the top of a flip-chart page where everybody can see.

Answer the question "Why did this happen" individually, capturing your results on a sticky note and annotating it with a "1" in the top right corner.

Consider your answer to the previous question, and again answer the question "Why did this happen" individually, capturing your results on a sticky note annotated with a "2" in the top right corner.

Repeat this question and response cycle until you can no longer meaningfully answer "Why" for a given sticky note.

As a group:

Collect the individual chains of answers, placing each person's numbered sticky notes in their own column below the title.

Frame the information as shown below.

Discuss the similarities and differences between interpretations as a group.

Consolidate into a single chain representing the consensus opinion of the group, rewritten on new sticky notes.



Image: Gamestorming p142

Mindset

The goal of the exercise is to clearly understand the situation, not to solve the problem. The information gained can be used to guide solutions and decision-making. Avoid focusing on solutions until after the discussion about the causes.

This exercise works best when participants continually explore the immediate, local causes of the symptom rather than attempting to immediately jump to a root cause. The intermediate reasons often spark ideas within the group that would otherwise be overlooked.

Nuance

This works best in groups of 3-5. If you have more than 5 people, consider forming into several smaller groups for the exercise, then bringing the results of the different groups together as a means of effectively iterating towards a deeper understanding. Capture the end result of the discovery on its own flip chart page. The cleaned up result is useful as an exhibit during the solution discovery, but be sure to keep the original material for reference.

Five is a guideline for the number of times to ask “Why?” If you feel more are required to understand the sources then by all means continue exploring. If you find one or two are sufficient then explore where you made logical leaps and perhaps missed incremental symptoms. The symptoms will be useful for initiating problem solving at multiple levels.

Holding a Movie Conversation

Our egos are often so hell-bent on getting our own ideas out that we can hardly wait for others to finish talking. What others are saying becomes a terrible interruption in what we are trying to say. In the process, we not only fail to understand what others are saying; we do not even hear them out.

The above is an extract from *The Art of Focused Conversation: 100 Ways to Access Group Wisdom in the Workplace* edited by R. Brian Stanfield. If this sounds like your retrospectives then surely you are not having fun and could benefit from The Art of Focused Conversation.

One of many methods for enabling better conversation is the approach developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) as part of it's Technology of Participation (ToP). This is a method of leading people through certain phases of reflection, enabling them to process their experience as a group.

ICA's Focused Conversation Model can help people reflect together on just about any subject. It can help people resolve an office quarrel, develop a strong marketing strategy, share reflections at friend's birthday party, or discuss a movie. The focused conversation is a relatively simple process at four levels. The conversation is led by a leader/facilitator who asks a series of questions to elicit responses that take a group from the surface of a topic to its depth of implications for their life and work.

The focused conversation uses questions at four levels:

1. The **objective level** – questions about facts and external reality
2. The **reflective level** – questions to call forth immediate personal reaction to the data, an internal response, sometimes emotions or feelings, hidden images and associations with the facts.
3. The **interpretive level** – questions to draw out meaning, values, significance, and implications
4. The **decisional level** – questions to elicit resolution, bring the conversation to a close, and enable the group to make a resolve about the future.

A fun way to learn the Focused Conversation Model is to *Hold a Movie Conversation*.

Thanks to Rally Agile Fellow Jean Tabaka for championing this technique.

D4 Holding a Movie Conversation

The Situation

For an office social event a team goes out to see a movie, and plans to talk about it over drinks afterwards.

Rational Objective

To pool individuals' experience of the film

Experiential Aim

To have fun probing the meaning of the movie

Hints

You might context the "who did you really identify with" question by saying something like, "There's a school of psychology that says our first answer to this question is never our real answer." The question, "Where do you see this movie going on in your life?" is the key to the whole conversation. If you get only flippant answers to this question, you will probably have to go around the room on it, but do this very nonchalantly, otherwise it will seem you are punishing people for flippancy.

Other Applications

After a group has been to a play, ballet, or symphony orchestra performance, a similar conversation can be used. Questions would need to reflect the particularity of the experience — words, movements or sounds.

THE CONVERSATION

Opening

You and I know what the standard movie conversations go like: "I liked it. Did you?" "No, I didn't like it at all. I hate that actress." Those are significant statements about the movie, but a good movie conversation can go a long way past likes and dislikes. So for this conversation, let's just sit back, munch some popcorn and let our minds wander back over the whole movie.

Objective Questions

What scenes in the movie do we remember?
Outdoor scenes? Indoor scenes?
What objects do you remember?
What noises do you remember in the movie?
Who were the main characters?
What were some of the lines of dialogue?
What things in the movie did you see as symbols?

Reflective Questions

Who did you like?
Who did you hate?
Where did you see emotion on the screen?
Where did you experience emotion in yourself?
What was your mood at the end of the movie?
Who did you identify with?
Who did you really identify with that you didn't want to identify with?

Interpretive Questions

What was the main character's struggle?
How did he deal with his struggle?
What was the movie about really?

Decisional Questions

What would be your title for this movie?
Where do you see this movie going on in your life?

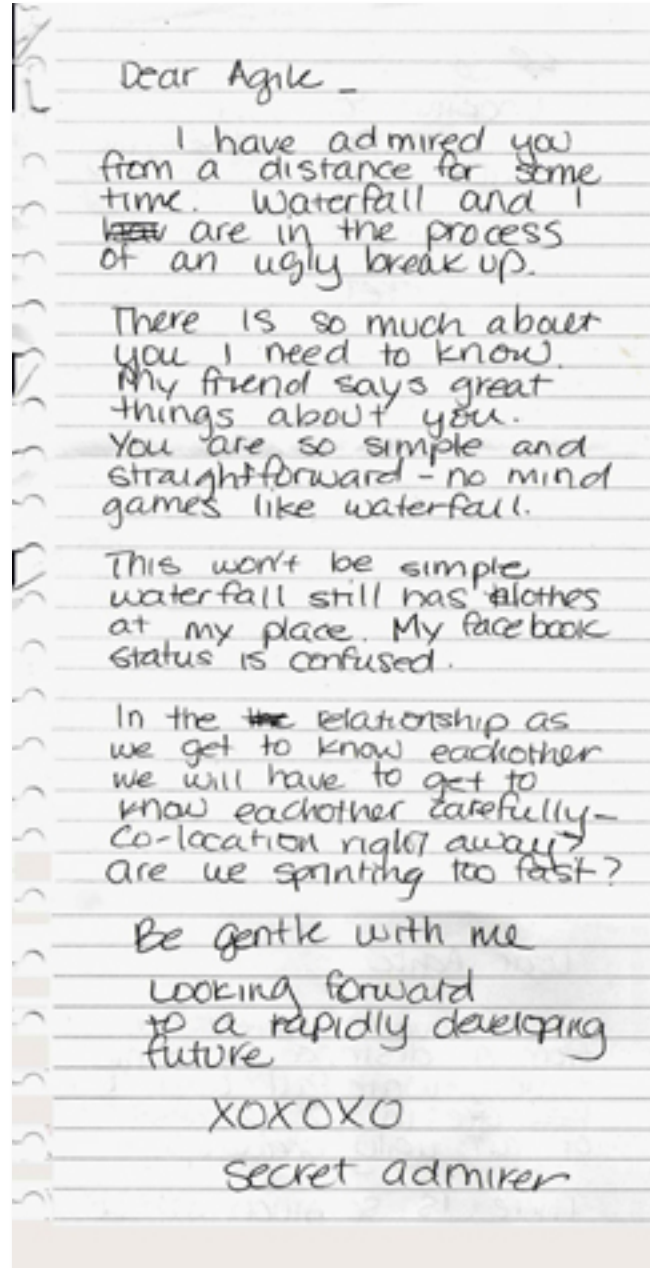
Closing

Well that was some movie. Isn't it interesting how a movie can be us talking about our lives?

Break-Up Letter

The [Breakup Letter](#) is a design research tool that [Smart Design](#) uses to understand the emotional connection between people and their products, services, and experiences. One person broke up with his cell phone, another, her single-cup coffee maker.

If we you want to mix things up a bit and have fun, try having your team write break-up letters to the parts of their process that did not add value and that they want to break-up with. If you like, turn it around and write a Love Letter to the parts of the process that made a difference in your life.



Circle Celebration

A classic technique to end an event is to capture feedback using Pluses (what worked well) and Deltas (what could we have done better). No matter how heartfelt and well-intended constructive criticism can sometimes be de-motivating and can take the joy out of a successful day. In her book *Training from the Back of the Room: 65 Ways to Step Aside and Let Them Learn*, Sharon Bowman introduces us to a more uplifting way to end an event, the *Circle Celebration*.

Our version of the Circle Celebration, goes like this.

Sharon suggests getting a soft, throwable object like a koosh ball or stuffed toy but we have improvised with a talking stick made from Sharpie Easel Markers

Do the following:

- Instruct attendees to form a standing circle in a cleared space of the room. You join the circle too.
- Explain that whoever has the ball must answer one of three questions:
 - What they enjoyed?
 - Who they appreciate?
 - How will they use what they learned?
- Toss the ball to one person to start the activity
- Participants toss the ball randomly round the circle until everyone who has the opportunity to speak does so
- End with a round of applause