The One-Hour Retrospective

Process Improvement for Sprints and Other Short Cycles

By Kathy Iberle

Key Points

- **The one-hour format is simple, yet sufficient for reflecting upon two to six weeks of work.**
- **A disciplined format for brainstorming, grouping, and deciding which issues to solve reduces the time needed for a retrospective.**
- **The retrospective will be much more effective if issues are stated as "problems to be solved".**

What is a Retrospective and Why Should I Have One?

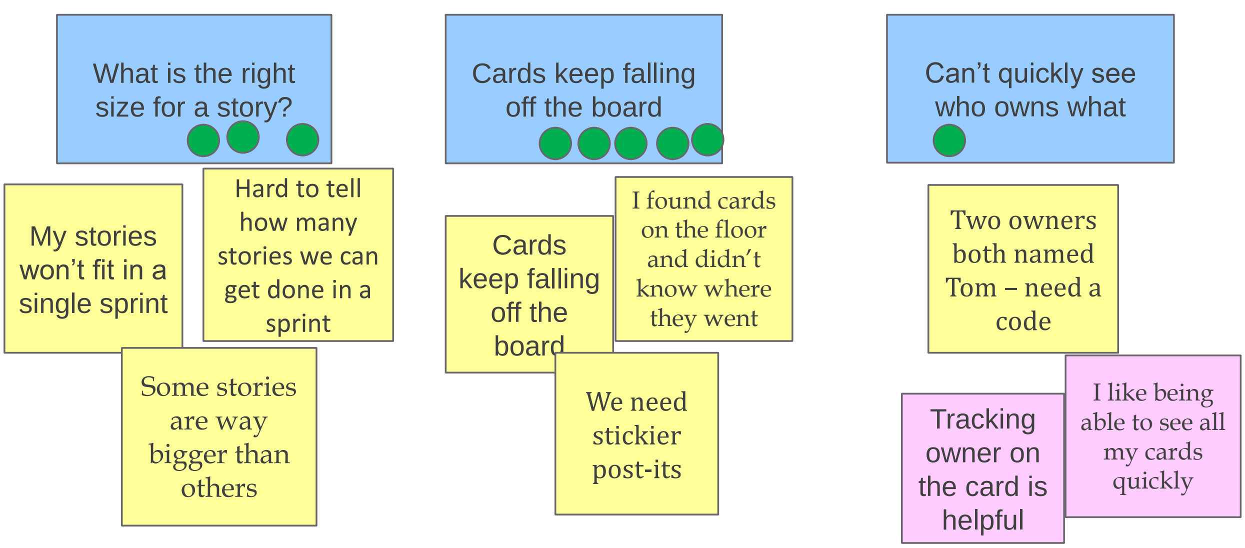
A retrospective is a meeting in which a team reviews the effectiveness and efficiency of its processes and collectively agrees on issues to address. Agile and Lean methods both call for a retrospective at the end of each cycle of activity, whether that be a sprint, an iteration, or a Learning Cycle. Reviewing the process once per cycle provides rapid feedback and prevents the accumulation of problems.

The One-Hour Learning Cycle Retrospective

This "One-Hour" format is suitable for small and medium-size groups (five to thirty people) who are reviewing their process every two to six weeks. The retrospective starts with the team members individually brainstorming both positive and negative things about their current process. The team then groups similar items and duplicates together under titles which capture the problem-to-be-solved. Finally, the team votes for the groups which most need attention. The groups chosen for attention are usually assigned to a sub-team for resolution.

Typical output from a One-Hour Retrospective is shown below.

- Yellow and pink squares = items from the brainstorm
- Blue rectangles = groups of related items with similar causes
- Colored circles = votes on what to address next



Running a One-Hour Cycle Retrospective

Materials Needed For 25 people

- 1 large **table,** divided into two sections labeled "Good" and "Needs Improvement"
- 100 3x5 index cards (yellow or white)
- 100 3x5 index cards (pink or other happy color)
- ~20 4x6 index cards (white or colored)
- 100 circular labels of the same color
- 30 fine point Sharpie markers

OR

- 1 large **white board,** divided into two sections labeled "Good" and "Needs Improvement"
- 100 3x3 sticky notes (yellow)
- 100 3x3 sticky notes (pink or other happy color)
- ~20 4x6 sticky notes (blue)
- 100 circular labels of the same color
- 30 fine point Sharpie markers

Pre-Meeting Preparation

- If the team has been running a suggestion box or issues list, bring that list to the retrospective. Likewise, bring any cards representing unsolved issues from previous sprints.
- The manager or Scrum Master decides how many process changes can realistically be pursued by this team during the next sprint. If you aren't sure of the team's bandwidth, start with three or fewer.

Retrospective Agenda

- 5 minutes – **Explain the rules.**
  Participants will write things that went well on the pink sticky notes (or index cards), and things that need improvement on yellow sticky notes (or index cards). Ask participants to capture the problem to be solved, rather than proposing a solution immediately.
- 10 minutes – **Brainstorm the good and the bad.**
  Participants silently write the good and the bad. Cards are placed on the table or white board.
- 5 minutes – **Combine duplicates & group issues which have the same cause.**
  Participants silently read the cards and move them around to group together duplicates and items with the same cause. It is ok to move someone else's card. Stop when the cards stop moving.
- 20 minutes – **Review and find a common denominator for each group.**
  For each group, the facilitator reads all the items in the group aloud. For groups in "Needs Improvement", the facilitator leads the team in finding a single "problem-to-be-solved" statement which summarizes that group of issues. This summary statement is written on the larger card.
- 5 minutes – **Vote on which issues to pursue during the next sprint.**
  Each participant is given 3 or 4 circular labels to vote for his or her favorite summary cards. It's ok to put more than one vote on the same issue card.
- 5 minutes – **Staff the targeted issues**.
  The manager identifies people to address the top issues, or the issues are added to the team's backlog for staffing during the sprint or cycle.

Hints on Running the Retrospective

Recognize the positive: Teams need to recognize and be recognized for what they are doing *right*. Start the brainstorm by asking for cards with the positive things. Wait a few minutes before asking for the issues. Likewise, start the review by reading the positive things first – with enthusiasm!

Don't try to solve the problem in the retrospective: Identify and prioritize only.

Voting: Remind participants that focus creates efficiency, so the team will choose only a few issues to fix.

Follow-up: The team must be allowed the time and resources to resolve at least one issue per cycle. If no issues are ever resolved, the retrospective will soon be seen (quite legitimately) as a waste of time.

Like this Knowledge Brief? See more at www.iberleconsulting.com.