

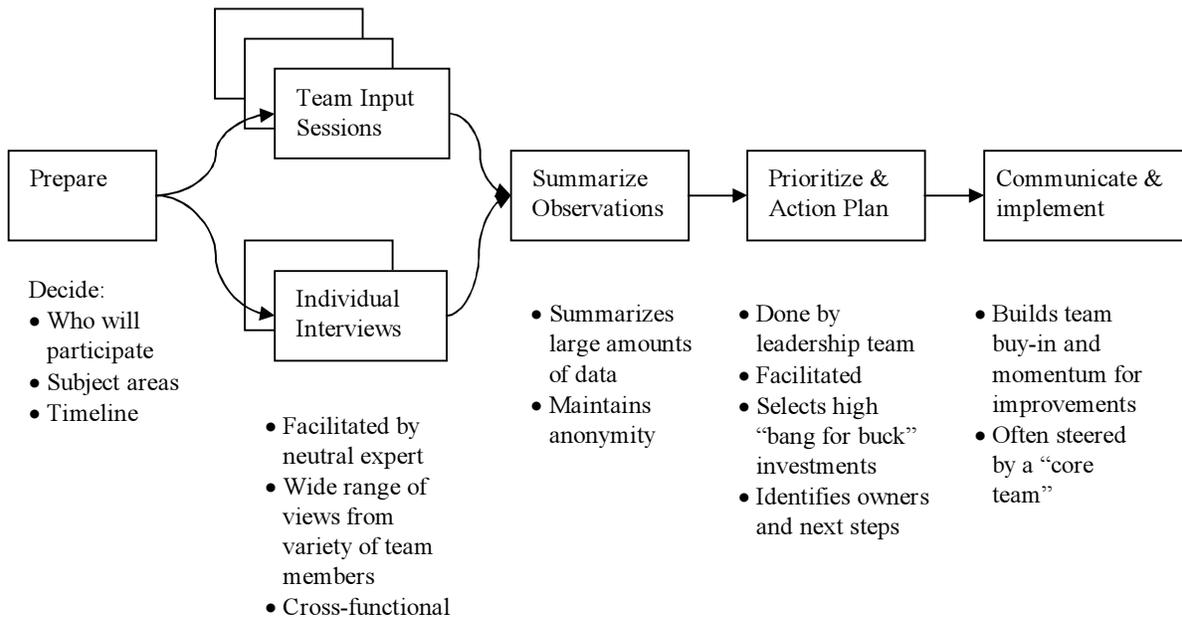
Project Retrospectives

What Is A Retrospective?

You may also have heard a project retrospective called a *postmortem* (kind of a gory name), a *lessons learned review*, or a *project review*. Whatever name you use, retrospectives are a recognized best practice for learning and continuous improvement in project-based organizations. They are a structured and effective way to gather “lessons learned” from the people who know best – those who worked on or with the projects. Input gathered at the retrospective becomes the basis for action planning, where the leaders of the organization systematically select and implement the “best bang for the buck” ideas to improve future projects. Top performing organizations learn constantly by making retrospectives a regular and high priority part of how they work.

How Is It Done?

Retrospectives generally follow some variation of the following flow.



Input gathering is guided by a simple framework (such as stop / start / continue). An experienced facilitator keeps the input on track and constructive. Retrospectives may be targeted toward specific areas, although it is often valuable to include some unstructured time to discuss what did and did not work well, regardless of focus area.

Both technical and non-technical areas are covered. Examples include:

- Technical – architecture, tools, development approaches
- Handoffs, interfaces with other teams, and integration across functional areas
- Risk management
- Quality
- Organizational support and environment

- People resources – including skills, training, staffing levels, and morale
- Time – including schedule management
- Management of scope changes and feature creep
- Communication – within teams, between teams, and with other parts of company

What Are the Results?

A retrospective is a learning experience, so the actions that come out of it are unique to the project being studied. Some examples of action areas are:

- Improved technical approaches, new tools, or training for specific skills
- Clarifying roles, responsibilities, and communications
- Methods to avoid certain surprises next time
- Ways to reduce risk, go faster, or save money
- Changes to planning and firefighting approaches that better balance reactivity vs. proactivity
- Updates to development approaches and techniques
- Improvements to decision making, prioritization of requirements, or managing scope creep

There are several keys to a successful retrospective.

1. The environment must be non-threatening, constructive and facilitated by an unbiased person. The purpose is learning, not blaming.
2. The participants represent a broad spectrum of team members with a variety of views.
3. Actions are prioritized, communicated, and followed up.

Organizations that invest in and act on retrospectives see more sustained and rapid improvement than competitors do. Retrospectives are a very powerful tool in your project management toolbox. How will you apply them to improve your projects?

About the Author

Jeff Oltmann is on the faculty of the department of Management of Science and Technology at the OGI School of Oregon Health and Science University. He is also a principal consultant at Synergy Professional Services, LLC in Portland, Oregon (www.spspro.com). Jeff welcomes your questions and ideas. You can contact him at jeff@spspro.com.