20+ Facilitation Tips for Great Retrospectives

– The Practitioner’s Guide to Establishing a **Powerful Change Process** Using Retrospectives –

by Jean Michel Diaz

Introduction

The format “team retrospectives” received much publicity in the last few years. Interestingly enough though, the format itself is not new. So called “debriefing sessions” **have been in use for years in the medical and military sector for decades**. Therefore there is a lot of research about such team-reflection formats already, suggesting that retrospectives can boost the team productivity by 25% and even triple the engagement rate.

Still, establishing retrospectives can prove to be **a challenging endeavor**. This ebook shares important considerations when establishing and facilitating retrospectives in agile teams.

Hopefully, reading this ebook helps you unleash the potential of retrospectives as a powerful tool to **establish a continuous bottom-up improvement process**.

> “ *If you adopt one agile practice, let it be retrospectives, everything else will follow.*
>
> Woody Zuill, Agile Pioneer & Evangelist

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Chapter 1

Get The Basics Right

Before you start with retrospectives, there are a couple of basics that you should take care of. Skip this chapter, and chances are that your retrospectives will suck and you can't figure out why.

Internalize the "Prime directive"

The Prime Directive embodies the **core philosophy of a retrospective**. Every participant should have not only heard about it, but also internalized it:

> "*Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.*
>
> Norm Kerth, Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Review

As the definition states, the focus of our thinking should always be to question the changeable factors instead of questioning people. So **how do you know if the Prime Directive has been internalized** by your team?

Well, you can hear it. Here are some examples:

Not following the Prime Directive, your team members might say something like:	What the same situation should sound like instead:
It's Gerrits fault, he's just not ambitious enough.	*Gerrit didn't fulfill his goals - maybe he has too many priorities at the moment?*
Lucas just doesn't care about rules or agreements in our team.	*I think Lucas' actions contradict our rules. Maybe we should specify them better?*
Maria is missing the needed quality standards.	*As we have to review Marias' work quite often, it might make sense to update our "Definition of Done"?*

The key difference in the phrases is to **respect that external factors may hinder people from unleashing their potential** instead of blaming them personally.

Thus if you hear blaming instead of asking which factors may have caused the suboptimal outcome, you should **immediately address it** to raise awareness.

Even mature teams can neglect the Prime Directive from time to time - so stay aware of this!

Tips for practitioners

- ❓ Make the "Prime Directive" part of every teams' onboarding before they start to use retrospectives
- ❓ Visualize the Prime Directive on your retro canvas /whiteboard
- ❓ Address contradictory behavior immediately or in the checkout of a retro

Don't confuse the "Vegas rule"

To help people open up in retrospectives, it's a key to **create a safe space**. Therefore, the "Vegas Rule" is another interesting concept that your team should be familiar with.

> *"What is said in the retrospective stays in the retrospective."*
>
> Vegas Rule of Retrospectives

Don't get confused though!

While feedback, discussions and their authors should remain confidential, resulting **action items can be shared publicly**. Thus it makes a lot of sense to talk about which action items should remain in the team only and which one can be (or even should be) shared with other people within the company.

Also make sure that bringing up feedback or concerns in a retrospective doesn't entail blaming or intimidations later outside of the retrospective by other team members.

Tips for practitioners

- ❓ Make the "Vegas Rule" part of every team onboarding before they start to use retrospectives
- ❓ Talk about the publicity scope when defining action items to avoid misunderstandings

Team Rules Rule!

Do you anticipate or observe **behavior that's hindering your team** from unleashing the potential of retrospectives?

Don't be shy and just **propose your own rules** to add besides the Prime Directive and the Vegas Rule!

Having a "Our Team Retro Rules" whiteboard is a great mechanism to **include the whole team in reflecting** how the retrospectives can be improved further.

If you decide to introduce Team Retro Rules, make sure you **review them regularly** and also question them from time to time. Sometimes removing or adapting an old rule is better than constantly adding new ones.

Team rule inspirations

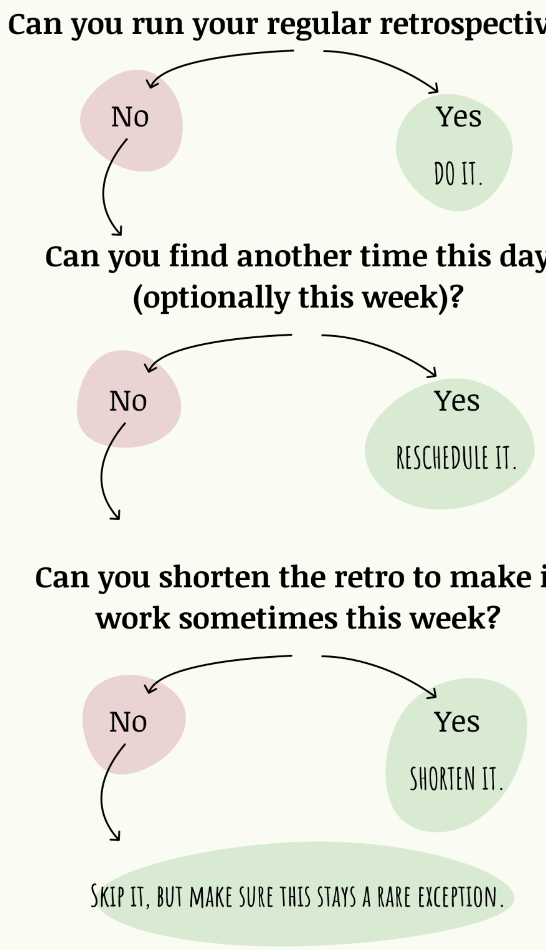
- ❏ Prime Directive
- ❏ Vegas Rule
- ❏ Allowed to interrupt monologues
- ❏ No Blaming
- ❏ No Action Items in the 1st half
- ❏ WIP Limit of 6
- ❏ Weekly Action Item Review
- ❏ Quarterly review of our team retro rules

Consistency is key - don't cancel retrospectives

"Oh, this week we can't make it. Are you OK with skipping this retro?"

No, we're not OK. Skipping retrospectives is the last resort and **should be avoided**. It's even **OK to do shorter versions** of retrospectives if needed. So be prepared to have short retro formats in your repertoire that you can use in emergencies.

Here's the escalation path we propose:



If you find yourself regularly skipping retros, you should take a hard look at the reasons for that. For exceptional circumstances, make it a habit to have shorter retrospectives or reschedule them within the iteration if needed.

Facilitation Rights need to be earned

Just like **players choose their coaches**, agile teams choose their facilitators. If football players refuse to work with their coaches, their team falls apart.

The first reason why your team could object to your facilitation role is that you are **not neutral enough**. Ask yourself: Which other roles and interests besides the facilitator of the retrospective do I have? Which personal interests do I pursue when facilitating a retrospective?

Most certainly, you'll discover that there are personal interests that influence how you run your retrospective. Think about it: When you observe conflicts in a team, your goal as a team coach is to address it. By doing so, you softly **impose your perspective on the team** all the time. That is not necessarily bad, as your job is to challenge your team with your observations. But if you don't give enough room to the perspectives of others, they will question you as a neutral facilitator.

So do yourself a favor. If you have personal interests that you're bringing into your facilitator role, **admit it openly and create transparency** about the competing interests in your roles.

If you have any early indication that your role as a neutral facilitator is questioned, be open to **offer the facilitation role to somebody else** for certain topics.

Also, we experienced that it's generally a **good idea to rotate the facilitation role** in your team. By having everyone taking the lead, you'll (a) get more empathy for your facilitation efforts and (b) increase your team's self-efficiency.

Master facilitation phrases

There are **two main challenges in facilitating any meeting**. The first is to open up the discussion and the second is to stop it.

Luckily, there are some generally applicable Facilitation Phrases that can help you out:

To open a discussion

- Play dumb: *I wonder what is meant by X? Can someone give an example?*
- State a controversial hypothesis: *Based on the feedback X, I could arrive at the conclusion that we could just do Y. Am I right?*
- Direct approach: *Jens just mentioned X. I wonder how you perceived that situation Michaela?*

To stop a discussion

- End monologues: *From what I understood your main point is X, right? Great, are there other perspectives on this topic?*
- Propose to move to the next agenda point: *I think "neglected definition of done" summarizes this nicely. Given the time, I'd suggest moving on to the next point, if nobody objects.*
- Ask to reschedule individual discussions: *I think the details here are more relevant for the two of you then for the rest of the group. How about the two of you having a breakout session on this later?*

Especially in retrospectives, where it's key to **give all ideas the room they deserve**, those sentences will help you out a lot.

Yes, you're creative - but Start easy

Scrolling through agile blogs, I often feel like Scrum Masters tend to show off with their creative retrospective formats. It's almost like a public competition taking place.

Maybe it's just me, but coming up with random retro formats just to be different doesn't really make sense. In fact, I've seen a lot of **teams with tough schedules that appreciate keeping their retrospectives simple** and straightforward.

Especially for beginner teams, my suggestion is to use simple standard formats in the first iterations. **Use creative formats wisely to spice up** the retrospective from time to time. If you feel the urge to make every retrospective a creative firework, you're running the risk of **oversaturating your team**.

Also be aware that some formats require a high team-maturity and personal trust. Therefore double-check your icebreakers and put yourself in the shoes of your team members: **Will everyone feel comfortable to open up and participate?**

If you experience that retro formats are making team members feel uncomfortable, make sure to tone it down again in the next iterations. There will be a process of “opening up”. Allow this process to take its time.

Give room to nay-sayers

We often get the question: How should I deal with team members who question the merits of a retrospective?

Our experience shows that it's best to **let critics freely express their thoughts**. Don't even try to require critics to only speak about their criticisms in 1-on-1s. Let them do so **publicly in your team**.

Why? Because sharing criticism often triggers a good discussion about what team members would like to do differently in retrospectives. This **discussion is a huge learning opportunity** for you as a facilitator and allows you to get to know some new perspectives.

You might say: "*What if the team comes to the conclusion that they want to abandon retrospectives altogether?*" At least to us, this has never happened. Instead, the discussion proved fruitful and showed the team that the retrospective is the team's meeting and that they're welcome to shape it. Keep in mind: **The retrospective belongs to the team**. As a facilitator, you're a service provider for the team.

The real **worst case scenario** that is spoken too little about, is that a facilitator never gives that room to critics, the team gets frustrated which results in **retrospectives with 0% team engagement** → Opening up the room to "nay-sayers" is the far better option!

Chapter 2

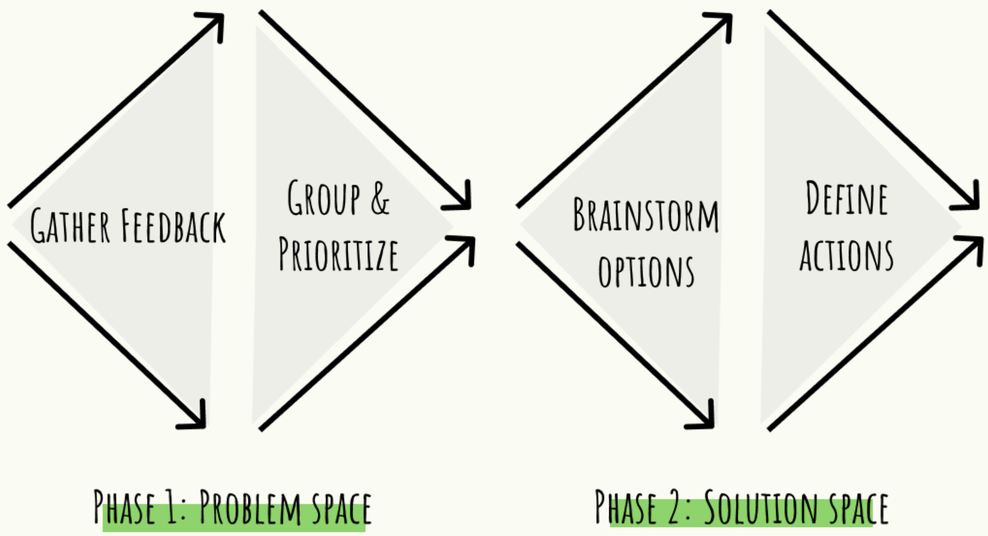
Survive in the Jungle of Retro Formats

As many options as there are to design a retrospective,
there are just as many ways to muck it up.

Instead of suggesting specific formats (there are enough out there), this chapter presents guiding principles that help you build your own retrospective formats and enable you to anticipate what may work and what doesn't.

Understand the double-diamond

The **classical model of a retrospective suggests 5 stages**: (1) Set the Stage (2) Gather Data (3) Generate Insights (4) Decide What to Do and (5) Close The Retrospective. But there's another model that I find more helpful than this classical one. Let me introduce you to: The Double Diamond.



The Double Diamond model emerged from the **research of "divergent and convergent thinking"** by Béla H. Bánáthy, a professor at UC Berkeley back in 1996.

The model is really helpful to lead your facilitation efforts in a retrospective: In divergent phases ("Gather feedback" and "Brainstorm options"), it's your job to **get as many options** on the table as possible. The convergent phases ("Group & prioritize" and "Define actions") are exactly the opposite. It's your job to **align the team and create focus**.

Keep this model in mind, as I'll reference it again later!

PS: Check out [this blog post](#) to learn more about the model.

Don't skip check-ins

We talked about shortening retrospectives. Here's one way to not shorten a retrospective: Skipping the check-in.

The purpose of the check-in is to create an atmosphere of trust and help the participants to arrive in the meeting. If you skip this step, participants will feel less welcome to actively contribute to the meeting and share their perspective. Especially when you plan to have a shorter retrospective, you should make sure to use the check-in to actively create the open atmosphere. By skipping this part, participants will most likely keep their mind on their daily tasks and you miss out on getting their full attention for the retro.

Instead of skipping the check-in, you can always choose a simple open question that only takes about 20 seconds per participant. Here are some suggestions:

Suggestions for quick check-in questions

- ❓ What would you do right now if we skipped this retro?
- ❓ If you could switch roles with one person in our organisation today: Who would you switch with?
- ❓ What's been the highlight (just one thing) of your weekend?
- ❓ What is going to be your dinner later today?

Summary: Short check-ins are better than no-check-ins.

Collect feedback upfront

Here comes a better alternative on how to increase the efficiency of your retrospectives: Collect feedback upfront.

Maybe you've experienced this: In the "Gather data" step, some people come up with feedback within a minute or two. Others need more like ten minutes before they're able to articulate their feedback. One part of the team is bored, the other half feels rushed. Worst case: Some people might not even come up with issues that are important to them because of perceived time pressure.

Collecting feedback upfront can help you to break this dynamic. Instead of only having a "Gather data" solely within the retrospective, you might as well ask for feedback upfront by using either a survey, a feedback inbox, a shared agenda document or anything that your team feels comfortable with.

The options range from already sharing the whole retro format (like Sailboat or Starfish) upfront or just asking in general "What do you want to discuss in our next retro?"

Just to clarify: I suggest adding an additional option here and not skipping the "Gather data" part in the retro completely. Discuss with your team whether they think collecting feedback upfront could be helpful. If they agree, try it out!

The best retro is shorter than you think (Avoid 60+ minutes)

According to the Scrum Guide, retrospectives should be timeboxed to a maximum of **three hours for a one-month sprint**.

Having a timebox of three hours for a retrospective gives me chills: **Nobody can stay focused for that long**. And if the facilitation sucks, I'll be trapped listening to the same people repeating their monologues again and again.

Don't get me wrong: Using three hours per month for reflection is a fair ratio and definitely not exaggerated. But why does the time have to be invested in one single meeting?

We've had very good experiences with **shorter timeboxes for retrospectives and instead doing them more frequently** - like on a weekly or bi-weekly basis.

In short meetings, your team will be **more engaged, less stressed** to lose half a day, and you won't risk burning all your reflection-time in one shot. Shorter timeboxes in our experience also increase the awareness to not hold extensive monologues, but to use breakout sessions instead and respect each individual's time.

No action items in the first half

Remember the “Double Diamond model” from earlier? It divides the retrospective in a problem space followed by a solution space. I find this distinction to be very valuable guidance as many teams fail their timeboxes in the first part due to neglecting this distinction.

The first half of the retrospective (“Gather data” in the classical phases) is just about **creating a shared understanding about the feedback within the team**. And as a facilitator you should strictly stop there.

Any ideas for action items can be noted of course, but you should avoid any discussions about defining action items prematurely in the first half. **Defining action items (if done correctly) takes time and will need discussions**. If you open up the room for such discussions, you’ll completely distract your team’s focus and fail your timebox at the expense of other feedback that has not even been discussed yet.

Remember

If you haven’t presented and prioritized all feedback yet, don’t create action items.

If you think “Well, but we sometimes have good ideas for actions and why can’t we just immediately record them.” you should read chapter 3 and you’ll see that the initial idea for an action item is rarely the best option.

Stay tuned and for now just **note them down as “ideas for action items” in the first half**, but DON’T record them as final action items yet.

Embrace silence & be comfortable to Interrupt

As a facilitator, you might feel uncomfortable interrupting your team members - especially, when you're thankful that someone fills the silence after you asked a question.

But let me tell you: Silence is often better than monologues. You should **interpret silence as a positive thing** as silence is room for team members to share their perspectives. Once you're not afraid of silence anymore, you'll be more comfortable to interrupt your team members when topics are unsuitable for either the retrospective in general, or when they're already rushing ahead.

Sometimes I asked other facilitators "Why didn't you interrupt them?". Mostly they knew and admitted that the contribution wasn't beneficial at all for the retrospective, but they didn't intervene anyway. **Not interrupting unsuitable contributions decreases the quality of your retrospective** and questions your role as a capable facilitator.

Imagine this	I am a regular team member. We have a two hours retrospective scheduled (which I think is way too long). We have one team member who constantly fills up this time with irrelevant monologues. I know that our facilitator doesn't interrupt such thought outpourings. Now can you imagine how much I am not looking forward to this meeting?

Interrupting contributions in a respectful way is a super important skill that you should actively work on - see chapter "Master facilitation phrases". Mastering this skill can be the key to take your retrospectives to the next level. Not mastering it will take away your power.

Chapter 3

Taking Action

While everyone talks about creative retrospective formats, reflecting about how to define great actions often falls short. But: The perceived value of retrospectives is highly coupled to the effectiveness of derived action items.

It's time to shift the attention!

When "no action item at all" is the best option

Coming up with action items can be tough. Therefore, facilitators are **tempted to go with the first action item suggestion** that comes up without questioning the proposals thoroughly.

The result: You accidentally **establish a low quality-hurdle for action items and end up with a bunch of semi-sophisticated action items** which deliver no further value down the road.

"Quality over quantity" is important here, even if that means not deriving any action items from a retrospective at all. Remember: The merits of a retrospective are not only bound to the derived action items. The discussions themselves can also resolve tensions and bring value for the team.

Here are some **situations where it's better to skip creating action items**:

- **Resolved in retro:** A conflict / tension might have already been addressed enough by bringing it up during the discussion and the team agrees that no follow-up is needed.
- **In progress already:** Even if the team has voted a topic as a top priority, it doesn't mean that you necessarily need an action item for it. Often the team's top priorities are being worked on already. Don't create action items for topics that are already being worked on.
- **No mutual understanding yet:** There might be topics coming up in a retro for which you cannot create a common ground in the limited time of the retrospective. Instead of forcing a specific action item, scheduling a follow-up session is often the better alternative. (By the way: "Scheduling a follow-up" is also kind of an action item 😉)

Take your time to get it right

As previously stated you should aim to establish a high quality-standard for action items in your retrospective. Accordingly, you should plan enough time to do so.

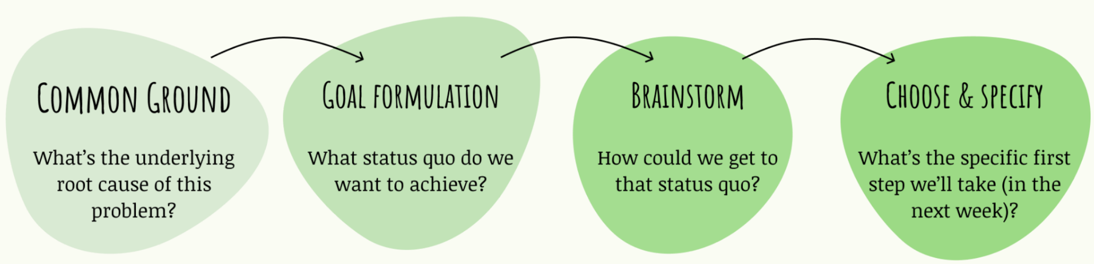
Getting an Action Item right **requires your team to have a common understanding of the underlying problem**. If you don't have that yet, a joint root cause analysis might be needed.

Once the understanding of the problem is aligned, you can **formulate a goal** that you'd like to achieve. It's not yet answering how you'd get there.

Only when you've aligned the problem and the goal can you **brainstorm how to get there**. Don't be tempted to just note the first idea here as the action item. Instead, go the route of the Double Diamond model and allow divergent thinking to spark creativity.

When your team has listed some ideas, it's about making them as specific as possible using the SMART acronym for example (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). Don't lose your patience here as the last step is just as important as the prior ones. I get frustrated when reading action items like "*More proactive feedback*". This will never work. As a facilitator you should **insist on making this so specific that it'll be crystal clear if you did it** or didn't like for example "*Schedule weekly 1-on-1s for proactive feedback*".

I hope the following process chart illustrates why great action items takes time and should not be done within the gather data phase already:



Establish "Action Item Review"

I am always astonished **how little teams follow-up on their action items**. Most action items just disappear from the team's radar after a week or two. That's sad.

However there's often a good reason for not following-up on action items: There are way too many of them and most of them suck. **No one has an interest in being confronted with this truth** and thus skipping the review is an appreciated option.

You, however, have implemented the past tips and therfore have a high quality standard for action items and a rigorous specification process that **makes it easy for your team to discuss progress** on the topics.

If you've taken the time to specify action items correctly, this is a **great template to review your action items**:

1. Let the responsible person present:
    a. *What's the progress and are there any new insights to share?*
    b. *What's your suggestion on how to continue with this?*
2. Ask the team:
    a. *Do you agree with the presented process and the shared insights?*
    b. *Do you have any suggestions on how to change the proposed next steps?*
3. Let the responsible person make the decision

    Based on what you have heard: Would you change your initial suggestion on the next steps?

The action item review can take place in a **team's weekly/ jour-fixe (or whatever you call it) or in a future retrospective**. Just make sure it happens as a fixed agenda point somewhere.

Introduce a WIP Limit

Not generating too many action items from a retrospective is one thing. The other is to close action items by either completing or discarding them. Only when you do both, you'll **maintain a manageable work-in-progress** (WIP) amount.

With a growing WIP amount, you have to **divide your team's attention and time across all open items**. As a result each individual item gets less attention.

WIP limits are a great way to **avoid dilution of attention** and introduce a prioritization process for open topics as well. So if you observe a dilution of attention, propose a WIP limit and strictly enforce discarding action items before adding new ones.

In our experience **a good WIP limit is 5 - 10 action items at a time**. More than 10 will make your "Action Item Review" feel like eternity.

A WIP-limit will also have a **positive effect on your practices and quality** of action items:

1. When reviewing action items, teams become more open to discard topics with fading importance.
2. Action items will be scoped more carefully in the first place to allow closing them earlier.
3. Team's quality-standards for new action items become higher, as a new topic could potentially have to replace an existing one.

No backlogging

“So now that we have a WIP-limit, let’s just create a backlog for action items!” - No, please don’t!

Backlogging ideas for action items that have not made it through the prioritization process is a bad idea.

Why? First of all, you’d have to **constantly review the backlog and identify topics that have become obsolete**. Secondly and most importantly, each retrospective isbuilt on the team's feedback and thus **important topics will come up again anyway**.

Please **save your and everyone else's time** and don’t create a backlog for action items.

Same goes for so-called “Keep aware”-action items (action items that are nonspecific and just take up space in your action item review without ever having an update). Just as a backlogged action item, they are **basically just a graveyard for obsolete topics**. Before creating a “Keep aware”-action item you might as well just discard it and see if the feedback comes up again. If it does, you can take the time to create a “real action item” for it.

Visualize continuous improvements

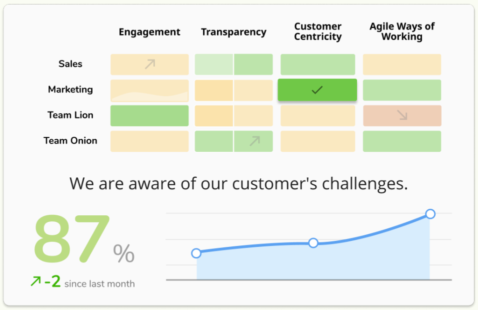
Even if you've implemented all of the above, **team members could still have the feeling that not much has changed**. They're not to blame: Continuous improvement processes shouldn't feel like a revolution taking place on a weekly basis and can get overlooked quickly.

Still, as a facilitator you can find ways to visualize the improvements and use those visualizations as a **powerful tool to boost the team's motivation**.

Here are some ideas how continuous improvements can be visualized:

- Have a whiteboard wall with all your action items on a timeline. This will automatically visualize the quantity of improvements.
- Use storytelling to visualize the quality of the improvements. Reviewing your initial problem analysis and goal statement will help you paint a vivid picture of the past and how far you've come already.
- Use data points like a "Team Happiness Score" to underline the overall progress and share those results regularly with the team.

By the way: Tools for team development like Echometer can help you with the visualization by automatically listing all past action items and tracking "Team Health Check" statistics within as well as across teams.



Final Tip

Get constant feedback from your team

The check-out of a retro often degenerates into a round of everyone confirming: "Retro was great, thanks."

A fun way to spice the check-out of a retro up a little and to add a quantitative indicator is to **add a ROTI (Return On Time Invested) question** by simply asking:

> *On a scale from 0 to 10, how well invested was the time for this retro?*

This data will give you insights and serves as an early warning indicator if the team's engagement decreases.

Additionally you shouldn't settle with general kudos. Instead **ask clarifying questions** to understand what exactly they liked. From time to time you should also do **informal 1-on-1s with team members** to better understand how they perceive the retrospectives. Maybe they have other perspectives and ideas that help you improve!

At the same time talking with your team about the retrospectives is a great way to show that **you don't only expect your team to reflect their work, but that you do so as well**.

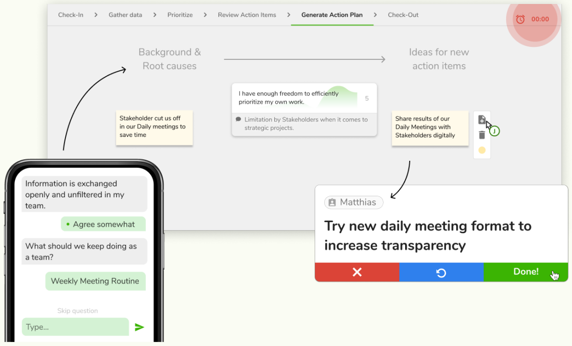
Want to accelerate your team development and agile transformation?

Then check out Echometer!

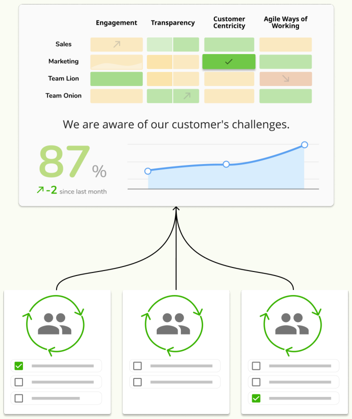
Echometer is a software tool that uses **psychological know-how** to help unleash the potential of employees & teams in organizations through team retrospectives – measurable and independent of location. Echometer makes it easy to

- ✅ Initiate **insightful self-reflections and discussions** in team retrospectives
- ✅ Track the **effectiveness of action items** automatically
- ✅ Generate customizable **cross-team health checks** on click

Intelligent team surveys, retro whiteboards & action item tracking - all in one



Create transparency on cross-team developments to steer your transformation



👉 [Click here to learn more]()

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

Jean Michel Diaz

After finishing his business studies in Germany in 2017, Jean worked as Executive Assistant in a German DAX30 Joint-Venture.

Fascinated by the power of retrospectives and believing in a huge shift towards a New Work-culture, he co-founded Echometer in 2019. His personal ambition is to build a tool that empowers teams inside and outside of the "agile" bubble to leverage the potential of retrospectives.

Jean is also a certified Scrum Master and has facilitated retrospectives for various companies - especially for companies in an early stage of their agile transformation.

Helpful Resources

Echometer	A tool to facilitate interactive retrospectives with an integrated team health check to continuously measure the team development. echometerapp.com
Ebook “Team Flow”	A free, 80+ page ebook from my co-founder and psychologist Christian with practical workshop formats to understand the concept of “mindset” and get your team into the “team flow”. echometerapp.com/get-ebook-teamflow-mindset-change/
Echomat	A free library of workshop formats to address specific team challenges. *echomat.org*
Project Scagile	A series of webinars & videos to learn how to scale agile ways of working in organizations from experienced practitioners. project-scagile.echometerapp.com