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# Reflective team learning in retrospectives

Today, in a VUCA world it is essential for teams to use their personal experiences, learn from them, and change as fast as they can to stay ahead of the curve. Reflection is the key, and agile teams have elaborated exciting forms of reflective team learning to be able to adapt to - or even lead - an extremely fast changing business environment. We picked one single part of their organizational culture which we think to be the most important, and which is easily applicable for non-agile teams.

Retrospective is a special meeting devoted to reflective team learning. It is a time to talk about the experiences of the past period (usually 1-4 weeks, because agile teams work in small iterations producing incremental parts of the final product), and to discuss what went well or wrong, find opportunities to improve the way they work together, and decide which one (or a few) changes to try out in the next period. The change is frequently experimental. At the next retrospective they discuss whether it has worked or not.

Retrospective originally comes from Norman Kerth's project retrospectives<sup>1</sup>, but agile teams took the genre, and adopted it to their special needs.<sup>2</sup> He was talking about retrospectives in terms of 2-3 days to discuss every aspects of a big project, but agile teams have smaller time scale, so they do 1-2-hour retrospectives (the shorter the better). According to Kerth, the four key questions of a retrospective are 1) What did we do well, that if we don't discuss we might forget? 2) What did we learn? 3) What should we do differently next time? 4) What still puzzles us?. When Barbara J Cormack talks about the reflective part of the learning cycle of leadership teams, she mentions similar questions: "(1) what went right, (2) what didn't go the way it was expected to, and (3) based on the results, in the future, what would you do differently"<sup>3</sup>. The clean-cut shared points of these two approaches are: learning from experiences and changing by action. But there are differences between them as well. While Cormack writes about the learning cycles of planning - taking action - reflecting, the horizon of learning is much wider in a retrospective. First of all, the fourth one of the key questions (What still puzzles us?) focuses on the problems that are still open. They may not be connected to the plan or the expectations at all. The excitement and fun of solving problems is an essential part of agile organizational culture. That is, problems as such are interesting in themselves. Another difference is the focus of continuous learning. Coaching agile teams is a continuous, lifelong process. The learning process - just like the product delivery - is made in tiny steps, in an incremental way, but agile teams make such tiny steps very frequently (in every 1-4 weeks).

Although the four key questions to focus on are the ones mentioned above, Esther Derby and Diana Larsen<sup>4</sup> call our attention to that it is not possible to start an effective retrospective with the question of "What went well", because it requires data. Let us explain this. Norman Kerth originally described retrospective as "a ritual

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Kerth: Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews. Dorset House, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Kua: The Retrospective Handbook. A Guide for Agile Teams, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform 2013 p.1-2

<sup>3</sup> Barbara J. Cormack: Coaching involvement in 21st Century Leadership, ICN 14.Vol 1. pp.15-17, p.16.

<sup>4</sup> Esther Derby - Diana Larsen: Agile Retrospectives: Making Good Teams Great. Pragmatic Bookshelf, 2006

gathering of a community at the end of a project to review the events and learn from the experience. No one knows the whole story of the project. Each person has a piece of the story. The retrospective ritual is the collective telling of the story and mining the experience for wisdom.” Collecting data is important because no one has the same experience, even if they are talking about the same facts. The team members need to see the whole picture to have an insight. Similarly, the question “What should we do differently next time?” is meaningless without data and analysis. This is why the structure of retrospective is important. Derby and Larsen suggested these steps: 1) Set the stage 2) Gather data 3) Generate insights 4) Decide what to do 5) Close the retrospective. For now, it has become a widely used structure of retrospectives.

The first step is framing: It is essential for everybody to be clear what the exact focus of the retro is. The team discusses the working rules of cooperation. (Our experience shows that it can be useful to warm up the right brain with short visualization or creative activities too.) The second and third steps belong to the reflective process. Most of the retro plans and techniques can be used here, because this is the main part of the retrospective, and it must remain interesting. The second step is gathering data: what is the team’s experience, what are the members’ points of view of the issues. This step aims the team members to have a closer look at the issues, and recognize others’ thoughts and feelings concerning them, and see the big picture. The goal is to shape the collective, shared picture from the details, because without it team members may easily misunderstand each other, that brings down the effectiveness of the meeting. Generating insights means that the team digs into the depth of the issues: what has happened and why (you can use e.g. 5 why technique), what sort of resources have helped the team, what kind of interactions, patterns have led to the success, what has occurred as a risk (e.g. sailboat technique can be useful). This is the phase of analysis. It can take place not only by words, but also by visualization (e.g. collective mind mapping). The goal of this step is to create feasible ideas to solve the problems emerged. By the beginning of the fourth step the team already has options of how to develop themselves and their processes further. At this point the task is to make a collective decision, to choose some of them to try out in the next period.

We would like to emphasize the significance of good framing. The members of the team may live their experiences on different levels: some of them have shallower, simply factual, sense perceptions, while others may have really deep revelations about themselves or about the team. It may cause problems in understanding, if depth is not explicitly allowed. Recognition of profound patterns in group dynamics may disturb some members of the team. It is the task of the coach to set her eyes on such nuances and treat them gently to help the team stay together in the discussion. When we ask them to share their experiences, it may bring deep issues into discussion, and it can be really helpful when it supports them to uncover the root problems. It is the interest of the team to find them. This is why depth has a great value in team coaching. The coach has to use this value in order to solve the problem at hand, so she has to keep the team together, and find the dynamic level where they are able to meet. Framing can give a permission to any team member to bring depth into the discussion. On the other hand, it gives a permission to anyone who may have difficulty with it, to take the responsibility for her actual limits, and to give a voice to her feelings in the here and now.

The coach has to be able to support any level of depth that the team members bring into the discussion, while keeping the team together helping the team members find a way to each other. She has to support this dynamics of divergent and convergent way of thinking together, accepting that we may live our experiences from different points of view, different levels, but at the end of the retrospective the team has to create an action plan.

The good retrospective helps the team to recognize their patterns, and to change or to overwrite those that do not bring the right result. In lots of cases, the team reproduces the same pattern at the retrospective as the ones they produced during the sprints - patterns of processes, attitude, mindset, way of thinking, or even feelings. To voice the recognized patterns requires deep trust among team members. Changing a bad pattern can be painful. The team members usually unconsciously stick to those patterns because they are convenient somehow. Understanding the vulnerability of the person and the team, and the fact that it can be put on the table and can be discussed shows the team's maturity.

Retrospective provides support to collective learning on the team's level. The team members' personal knowledge can be important contribution to the team's development, if it is shared. Retrospective is not only to uncover and integrate this knowledge, but also to let the team to learn from it, and develop their cooperation on a self-organizing way. It is for teams who take the responsibility for their own development.

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Olga Kiss, PhD and Gabriella Peuker are the founders of AgileHuman - a team of experts to study the human side of Agile, and to bring its achievements to other fields of coaching. Olga Kiss is an academic, a coach, and she is the Vice President Research of EMCC Hungary. Gabriella Peuker is an EMCC EIA accredited coach at Practitioner level, team coach, trainer, OD consultant. She has more than ten years of experience in working with groups and teams in business, in the field of SMEs and multinational companies.

Co-initiating, co-creating, co-evolving, co-sensing are essential parts of our working together.

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### List of other Publications in Coaching

- Gácsi A., **Kiss O.**, **Peuker G.**, Pletser J. (2017) "4Ls retrospective technique of (self)reflection in 1-on-1 coaching practice " *7th International Mentoring and Coaching Research Conference 2017* Brussels: European Mentoring & Coaching Council, 2017. (forthcoming)
- **Kiss O.** (2016). "Coaching ROI dilemmas."(In Hungarian) *MAGYAR COACHSZEMLE* 2016/3. pp.13-18.
- **Kiss O.**(2016): "Maueutics ant the birth of excellence"(In Hungarian) *MAGYAR COACHSZEMLE* 2016/1. pp.23-32.
- Gácsi A., **Kiss O.**, **Peuker G.**, Pletser J. (2016) "Agility in Coaching"(In Hungarian) *6th International Mentoring and Coaching Research Conference* Brussels: European Mentoring & Coaching Council, 2016., pp.255-272.
- Csigás Z., **Kiss O.**, Generál P. (2016): "Does ROI Really Measure the effectiveness of Coaching?" *6th International Mentoring and Coaching Research Conference 2016* Brussels: European Mentoring & Coaching Council, 2016., pp.64-76.