

*The Addison-Wesley Signature Series*



A MIKE COHN SIGNATURE  
BOOK  
*Mike Cohn*

# IMPROVING AGILE RETROSPECTIVES

HELPING TEAMS  
BECOME MORE EFFICIENT

MARC LOEFFLER

FOREWORD BY  
JUTTA ECKSTEIN



# Improving Agile Retrospectives

- Creates an atmosphere in which everyone feels safe
- Tackles conflict constructively
- Has a sense of humor
- Keeps the energy level up during a workshop
- Asks the right questions
- Visualizes the input of the workshop's participants
- Stays neutral, but can also question the team's assumptions

As you can see, it's a long list, and I know very few facilitators who meet all the criteria. Some of the criteria, like a sense of humor, are hard to learn. Some people simply have a natural talent for these things. But even talented facilitators must practice. Like most things in life, most of the skills on the preceding list can be learned over time.

If you want to become a good facilitator, you must know where your strengths and weaknesses lie and continually work to improve. Of course, the best way to improve is by leading as many workshops as possible. Alongside this experience, you can further your development by taking courses and reading books on facilitation. Everything you learn can be deployed in the next workshop and refined. Thus, little by little, you can improve your skills in this very enjoyable area.

A full introduction to the topic of facilitation would exceed the scope of this book. However, in this chapter, I'll give you a brief introduction to the topic, as well as a few tips on some problems that typically occur in retrospectives.

When you look at the fourteen skills on the list, you'll realize that most of them can only be practiced if you're a good listener. That is why good listening is a facilitator's most important skill. Unfortunately, listening is a skill that is losing more and more value in our society. One of the main reasons for this is the increased number of forms of documentation that exist today: written documentation (e-books), for example, or audio recordings (MP3 or other digital formats). In the past, if you wanted to re-tell a story that was told to you, you had to

listen carefully when you heard it. Stories were passed on from generation to generation over centuries in just that way. Today, most of these stories are found in books, and you can simply read them. In the past, when musicians came into a town or village it was a big event because people only seldom had the chance to hear a good singer or instrumentalist. Today, there are recordings of these singers that you can listen to again and again. Because we no longer need to listen the first time, our society values good listening less than in the past.

Julian Treasure gave an interesting TED Talk [1] at the end of which he gave five tips on how to improve your listening skills:

- To regularly calibrate your hearing, you should spend three minutes a day in as quiet a place as possible.
- If you're in a very loud place, you should try to identify the individual noises. Where are the sounds coming from? Who is making the sounds?
- You should concentrate on everyday noises and try to enjoy them—the sound of your coffee machine or tumble dryer, for example. You should try to recognize patterns in these sounds.
- You should listen in different ways: actively, passively, critically, empathically, and so on. Also, become conscious of the differences.
- Finally, he introduced an acronym: RASA (Receive, Appreciate, Summarize, Ask). Always go through these four steps when listening to someone.

These five tips are a good starting point for consciously retraining your hearing. This is enormously important, as many of the techniques of a good facilitator are based exactly on the skill of listening.

In his book, *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* [2], Sam Kaner introduces 18 techniques for facilitators that are connected to listening. In the next sections, I would like to go somewhat deeper into some of them.

### **Practical Tip**

To start with, pick just one or two of the techniques described next and practice them in your next retrospective and, potentially, also in other meetings. Only when you feel that you've mastered these should you take up the next technique.

#### ***4.1.1 Respect Different Communication Styles***

People communicate in the most different ways, above all when laying out their ideas. Sadly, there are some communication styles that go down less well and that can deter people from listening. Because of this, sometimes even what might be the best of ideas remain unheard. Fewer good ideas are preferred because a participant cannot express himself particularly well. Unfortunately, many communications styles put most people off. Here are some examples of how discussion participants might use these off-putting communication styles:

- Continually repeating themselves
- Continually grinding to a halt through shyness or nerves
- Going overboard when presenting their viewpoint or adding irrelevant comments
- Suddenly wanting to take the discussion in a completely different direction
- Showing very strong emotions openly

Groups that are better able to accommodate these communication styles get a wider bandwidth of ideas and suggestions and thus, in the end, a better result. The key to this improved ability is, as always, the facilitator. Here are some examples of how a facilitator can improve communication in a group:

- If someone constantly repeats himself, the facilitator paraphrases to help the person summarize his point of view.

- With nervous participants, the facilitator can help by asking open questions (without steering in a particular direction).
- The facilitator can help participants who seem to want to start a whole new discussion by asking them to clarify how this new point fits into the present discussion [2, p. 43].

In any event, treating every participant with respect by listening carefully and, if necessary, by helping them to express themselves is always important. Of course, listening to each other is important, too.

### ***4.1.2 Paraphrasing***

The word *paraphrasing* comes from Greek and means “to outline” or “to give again in your words.” Paraphrasing is one of the facilitator’s most powerful and direct techniques because it shows the speaker very clearly that you have been actively listening. You can also use this technique to make sure that you have fully understood everything that was said. This is especially important when a speaker is expressing himself in a tangled and confusing way, and what he’s trying to say is not clear.

Paraphrasing is quite simple. Repeat what you have understood in your words. Afterward, always check that what you heard was what the speaker meant. Do this by asking, for example, “Have I understood that right?” or “Was it that what you wanted to say?” If you have misunderstood, ask the speaker to say it again more clearly. Keep doing this until you have correctly repeated his point of view or idea.

### ***4.1.3 Support Participants***

Sometimes, a person has problems clearly expressing his idea, or a statement is so confusing as to be incomprehensible. In such cases, the facilitator’s job is to ask the speaker targeted questions to

help him make his ideas comprehensible. Here are some possible questions:

- Could you give us an example?
- How come?
- What do you mean by...?
- Could you draw that for me?

With these and similar questions, you, as the facilitator, can help to get a clear picture of the idea.

#### ***4.1.4 Stacking***

Always use the stacking technique when more than one participant wants to speak at the same time. This technique prevents people from trying to talk over one another and is also useful when you have an especially dominant team member who would prefer to talk the whole time and prevent others from getting a word in. The way it works is quite simple:

- You say: “Everyone who has something to say about that, please raise your hands.”
- Then you decide the running order; that is, “Paul, you first, then Sonja, and third Sven.”
- After Paul is finished, you give the floor to Sonja and then Sven, and so on.
- When everyone has spoken, you again ask whether anyone has something to say about the topic. If there are more, start again from step 2.

Whoever has the floor has the exclusive right to speak. You make sure that he is not interrupted. Use this technique to make sure that everyone who has something to say gets the opportunity. An added benefit is that the whole discussion is calmer, and the participants are

in a better position to actually listen, instead of just waiting for a break in the flow of the talk to jam in their opinion.

#### **4.1.5 Encourage**

The encourage technique is used primarily when the facilitator has the feeling that a few participants are holding back and leaving the work to the others, or are naturally more introverted. When you encourage, you deliberately ask for other points of view, ideas, or comments, so that the quieter participants are also invited to the discussion. Here are some examples:

- Who else has an idea?
- Can someone give me an example of this point of view?
- Would someone who hasn't spoken yet like to comment on this?
- Are there any questions about this topic?
- How could we get to the heart of this?
- Who wants to play devil's advocate for this idea?

The goal of each of these questions is to give someone the opportunity to make his opinion heard. They are like a cross in soccer when the ball is passed across the goal mouth so that the ball need only be tapped in to score. I have often seen how questions like these can inspire someone to speak when until that point he had only been silent.

#### **4.1.6 Feedback Emotion**

Lots of people have a problem showing their emotions. Emotions, though, are an important part of human communication and therefore must also be considered. Above all, our emotions have a direct effect on the other participants of a workshop or retrospective. Address emotions head on, or you might unwittingly ignore them. As a facilitator, constantly be aware of the emotional mood, especially in conversations and discussions that deal with difficult topics. If you notice a strong emotion, the first step is to feed it back in the form of a