



# Retrospectives ANTIPATTERNS



Aino Vonge Corry

*Foreword by Diana Larsen*



# **RETROSPECTIVES**

## **ANTIPATTERNS**

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Small Talk

*... in which the team members spend time on small talk in small groups instead of focusing on sharing and learning, and the facilitator changes the activities to make them work together as a team again*

# Chapter 5



## **CONTEXT**

Titanic Software A/S has planned an off-site for next week in Trysil, Norway, where everyone will enjoy skiing together. Most of the people in the company are excited about the trip, and it is on their minds most of the time, especially now that it is only days away. Naturally, when time is set aside for meetings, it is tempting to discuss the trip: Will there be enough snow for skiing? What will they have to pay for themselves—the equipment? the food? the beer? And so on.

Sarah wants to start the retrospective, but she also understands the desire for small talk about the skiing trip, even more so now, because the last sprint was frustrating for most of the team members. She is therefore torn between allowing the skiing trip small talk or ending it and starting the retrospective.

## **GENERAL CONTEXT**

Some people are prone to spend time on small talk. To them, it is a way of relating to others, showing they like other people, and getting attention. Sharing pleasantries is an important way for most people to relax in each other's company, and small talk can start and flow easily between most people because of its innocuous nature. Small talk can be a good thing, especially for teams with remote people, because talking about food, travel, and so on, helps to build trust (see Chapter 22, **Lack of Trust**).

## **ANTIPATTERN SOLUTION**

As a retrospective facilitator, you want to be nice and you want people to feel good about the time they spend with you, so you allow time for small talk. This is not necessarily bad; if time is set aside for it in the retrospective and if everybody feels the need for it, small talk can set a comfortable atmosphere for the retrospective. Ending a nice conversation can be daunting, particularly for an unskilled facilitator, and you have to be sure that

what you have planned for the team will be of more value to them than their conversation. Too often, the small talk is allowed to continue.

## CONSEQUENCES

Time spent on small talk takes time from focused discussions or reflection on issues and events in the team's life together. Small talk can be important, because it helps people bond and provides a way for them to get to know one another. But in the setting of a retrospective, it eats precious time set aside for other discussions.

## SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of this antipattern are obvious, since it is hard to ignore people small-talking in the corners of the retrospective. Another, even more serious, symptom is that the facilitator runs out of time for making it a fruitful retrospective, for example, by skipping a phase or by not allowing everyone to talk.

## REFACTORED SOLUTION

If this is the first time you encounter small talk among the group, you can merely say that we need to focus on the issue at hand. Changing the activity is also effective, because small talk sometimes occurs when people have spent enough time on a particular task and are getting antsy. If the small talk occurs during small group sessions, it could also be that some people work faster than others. In that case, you should be able to give the chatty group another issue to consider to keep them engaged with the retrospective.

If small talk is an ongoing problem, you should address it at the beginning of the next retrospective by setting *ground rules*. Be sure to ask the team what additional ground rules they would like to have in place at retrospectives and perhaps also in general. Consider also whether small talk is occurring because the team simply needs a break after 45 minutes.

## Ground Rules

When a group of people chooses to become a team, they have to accept that they likely are a heterogeneous group with various expectations for working together. Some people need to discuss everything in order to learn new things; others need to read in solitude. Some people find it hard to concentrate without music; others need silence. Some people are relaxed about meeting times; others get very annoyed by latecomers.

A team can choose to set ground rules based on their expectations about group work. Some ground rules might apply to the group in general, such as “We are not late to the meetings” and “We do not interrupt each other.” Others might be personal, such as “If John is wearing headphones, he does not want to be disturbed.”

With ground rules, issues such as small talk don’t have to reach the point that you are irritated—you can just refer to the ground rules that everybody on the team agreed to follow. In my experience, a team with ground rules can avoid a lot of negativity and passive aggressiveness. Also, some of the unwanted behavior can be avoided by the facilitator, but it is more efficient if there are more people keeping an eye on the ground rules.

If people continue to engage in small talk even though you have ground rules, you can change the subject or give them more to do in order to change their focus. If the small talk continues, try moving closer to the talkers, so close they can feel your presence. In this way, you use your body language to make them aware that what they are doing is not what they decided as a team to do.

Often, your physical presence can remind them of their own collective decision on how to spend time during a retrospective. If it still does not work, you need to talk directly with the one who keeps initiating the small talk—preferably outside the retrospective.