

How to Run a Great Retrospective

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A 4-step facilitation guide for running retrospectives that surface real issues and produce action items people actually follow through on.

When to use this

Your team just finished an iteration, a project milestone, or a rough week -- and you need a structured way to reflect, identify what to change, and commit to specific improvements. This guide gives you the facilitation flow, the timing, and the tips to run a retro that doesn't waste anyone's time.

Process

Step 1: Prep the space

Set up before the team walks in. A good retro starts with a board that's ready to go.

Create a brainstorming board with three columns:

Going Well	Can Be Improved	Questions & Ideas
What's working? Keep doing it.	What's slowing us down or causing friction?	Anything you're curious about, want to try, or want to discuss.

Logistics:

- **Tool:** Miro, FigJam, a shared doc, or a physical whiteboard with sticky notes. Pick whatever your team already uses.
- **Duration:** 30-45 minutes total. Shorter is better -- retros that run long lose energy.
- **Invite list:** Start with the core squad only. Add stakeholders or managers once the team is comfortable with the format. Psychological safety first.
- **Schedule it:** Block the calendar for the same time every iteration. Consistency builds the habit.

Step 2: Silent brainstorm (5 minutes)

Everyone writes at the same time. No discussion yet.

How to run it:

- Set a timer for 5 minutes
- Each person adds sticky notes (or bullet points) to any column
- One idea per note. Short phrases, not essays.
- Play background music if it helps the room settle in. Lo-fi, instrumental, whatever your team vibes with.
- The facilitator writes too -- but less. Your job is to model participation without dominating.

Why silent? Talking first creates anchoring. The loudest voice shapes what everyone else writes. Silent brainstorming gives introverts, new team members, and people with unpopular opinions equal space.

Step 3: Dot-vote and discuss (15-20 minutes)

Surface the topics the team cares about most, then talk about them.

Dot-voting (2 minutes):

- Each person gets 3 votes (dots, emoji reactions, checkmarks -- whatever your tool supports)
- Vote on the items you most want to discuss
- You can put multiple votes on one item if you feel strongly

Discussion (15-20 minutes):

- Start with the highest-voted item
- Timebox each topic to 5 minutes. When the timer goes off, decide: are we done, or do we need a follow-up conversation outside the retro?
- The facilitator's job is to keep the conversation moving. If one person is dominating, redirect: "Thanks -- who else has a perspective on this?"
- Group similar items before discussing. Duplicates are a signal that the issue matters.

What to watch for:

- Problem-solving in the retro is tempting but usually unproductive. If a topic needs a deep dive, capture it as an action item with an owner and a deadline.

- Not every issue raised in a retro is solvable by the team. Name that when it's true: "This is outside our control. Let's escalate it to [person] with a clear ask."

Step 4: Action items with owners

A retro without action items is just venting. Turn insights into commitments.

For each action item, capture:

- **What:** The specific thing to do (not "improve communication" -- that's a wish, not an action)
- **Who:** One person owns it. Shared ownership means no ownership.
- **When:** A deadline or a checkpoint. "By next retro" is the minimum.

Follow-up:

- Review last retro's action items at the start of the next retro. Did they happen? If not, why?
- Add action items to your standup or team board so they stay visible between retros
- If the same action item carries over for 3+ retros, escalate it. Something structural is blocking progress.

Worked example

Team: Compass Squad (6 people, 2-week iterations) **Duration:** 35 minutes **Tool:** Miro board with 3 columns

Board after silent brainstorm (12 sticky notes):

Going Well	Can Be Improved	Questions & Ideas
Pair programming sessions are helping onboard new devs (3 votes)	Sprint planning takes too long -- we spent 2.5 hours last time (5 votes)	Can we try async standups on Slack instead of daily video calls? (4 votes)
Stakeholder demo went smoothly (1 vote)	Unclear acceptance criteria causing rework on 3 stories this sprint (4 votes)	What if we added a "definition of ready" checklist? (2 votes)
Design handoff improved since we started using Figma comments (2 votes)	QA is finding bugs late because they're not included in story kickoffs (3 votes)	

Top 3 discussed (by vote count):

1. Sprint planning too long (5 votes) -- team agreed to try pre-grooming the top 5 stories before planning
2. Unclear acceptance criteria (4 votes) -- team decided to pilot a "story kickoff" with dev + QA + designer before any story starts
3. Async standups (4 votes) -- team agreed to try for one iteration and evaluate

Action items:

What	Who	When
Pre-groom top 5 stories 1 day before sprint planning	Sarah (PM)	Next sprint planning (Mar 28)
Run story kickoffs for the 3 highest-priority stories next sprint	Marcus (Tech Lead)	Next sprint start (Mar 25)
Set up async standup channel and post the format	Jamie (Scrum Master)	By end of day tomorrow

Facilitator tips

- **The facilitator participates less.** Your primary job is to hold the space, manage time, and redirect tangents. Write a few stickies, but don't dominate the board.
- **Start squad-only.** Adding managers or stakeholders too early kills psychological safety. Build the habit with the core team first. Invite others once the team is comfortable being honest.
- **Name the safety contract.** Open with something simple: "This is about improving the process, not blaming people." Say it every time until the team internalizes it.
- **Not every issue is solvable in a retro.** Some items need a separate meeting, an escalation, or a structural change. The retro's job is to surface and prioritize -- not to fix everything on the spot.
- **Music matters more than you think.** Background music during silent brainstorm signals "this is thinking time, not awkward silence time." It's a small thing that changes the energy.
- **Watch the clock.** A retro that runs 15 minutes over teaches the team that retros waste time. End on time, even if you didn't cover everything. The unfinished items will come back next retro if they matter.

How did it go?

After your retro, check:

- ☐ Everyone contributed during silent brainstorm (not just the loudest voices)
 - ☐ Discussion stayed focused on the top-voted items, not whatever the most senior person wanted to talk about
 - ☐ Each action item has one owner and a deadline
 - ☐ You reviewed last retro's action items at the start
 - ☐ The retro finished on time
 - ☐ The team left with 2-3 concrete changes to try, not a list of 10 vague improvements
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