When All is Said and Done

Hosting a meaningful project retrospective

Christina Chen
Lead Program Manager
Microsoft Corporation

Disclaimer

The thoughts and opinions expressed in this presentation are my own and are not endorsed by the Microsoft Corporation.

Who am I?

- Lead Program Manager at Microsoft.
- 6.5 years as a Program Manager in the Microsoft Games Studios
- 3 Test internships in Microsoft Project

What is a Retrospective?

- A post-completion evaluation of a project by team members to discuss the successes and failures so that those lessons can be applied to future projects
- Can be applied at a milestone level
- Also called a Post-Mortem

Why have a Retrospective?

- Takes a macro level view of the project and analyzes cause and effect across the whole project timeline and project team
- Calls out specific problems or best practices so they can be applied to the next project
- Management can analyze results from Retrospective meetings across multiple projects to discover higher level issues across an organization
- Gives voice to team members that might otherwise not have it
- Provides closure on a project

Retrospectives are not for:

- Personal attacks
- Finding detailed solutions
- Hiding problems to paint a pretty picture
- Groups of people larger than 20

What you need for a good Retrospective

- A good moderator familiar with your industry, but not from your project team
- A scribe to take notes
- A neutral venue where everyone in the room can make eye contact
- A project timeline and an issues list filled out before the meeting
- Team members that fill out the issues list, create the What Went Well list and actively participate during the entire retrospective meeting
- Toys to diffuse nervous energy
- What went well list

The Moderator

- Takes the retrospective seriously and is willing to work hard to make it a success
- Organizes the meeting
- Is not part of the immediate project team
- Collects issues from attendees
- Understands the industry well enough to understand the issues, prioritize and group them
- Controls a room of emotional people and defuses volatile situations
- Decides whether to continue discussing a topic or to move on
- Keeps the meeting moving

The Scribe

- Adds notes about each issue to the original issues list
- Is the only person in the room allowed to interrupt the moderator
- Is the only person in the room allowed to have a laptop
- Sends the meeting notes immediately after the meeting

The Venue

- A neutral location (not a team member’s office)
- Does not tempt people to leave or be distracted (order lunch if necessary)
- Seats everyone so they can make eye contact

The meeting should not last more than six hours, including breaks

The Timeline

- Charts major milestones during a project
- Reminds people of the original goals of the project
- Allows newer team members to understand project history
- Helps the team to see cause and effect
- Is created through interviews with key team members

The Issues List

- The format is sent out by the moderator to ensure consistency
- The issues are filled out in advance of the meeting
- The moderator goes through the issues before the meeting to group and prioritize them.
- Contains the following for each issue:
  - What group raised the issue
  - What area the issue is in
  - What the issue is
  - How they knew it was an issue
  - Recommendation for addressing the issue
  - Follow up owner (to be filled in by the scribe during the meeting)
- The moderator should have a discussion length in mind for each topic

Team Members

- On large teams, the project retrospective meeting is usually between project leads. Leads need to make sure to get issues from their subordinates for the issues list.

- Team members need to remember that the retrospective is for their benefit and be timely in delivering the issues list and attending the meeting.

- Team members need to give their full attention and behave professionally during the meeting. The moderator should be prepared to intervene if they aren't.

Toys

- Play-Doh
- Gives fidgety people something to do
- Diffuses nervous energy
- Provides enough distraction for people with short attention spans, but not enough to distract from the meeting

What Went Well List

- People in retrospective meetings tend to focus on the negative, so end the meeting on a positive note
- People are always more ready to complain than to compliment, so the moderator must solicit this list before the meeting
- Allow new items to be listed during the meeting

Sample Meeting Agenda

10am-10:10am: Introductions, ground rules and agenda
10:10am-10:20am: Go over project history or timeline
10:20am-11:30am: Discuss issues in Section 1
11:30am-12:00pm: Lunch
12:00pm-1:30pm: Discuss issues in Section 2
1:30pm-1:45pm: Stretch/break
1:45pm-3:15pm: Discuss issues in Section 3
3:15pm-3:30pm: Discuss What Went Well
3:30pm-4pm: Summarize and wrap up

Key Points

- Preparation: Both the moderator and the team must spend time preparing before the meeting in order to have a successful retrospective

- Participation: The purpose of the retrospective is to help the team and the team must participate

- Prioritize: A large project may have too many issues to discuss. Make sure the important ones get discussed first. Spend the appropriate time on each issue.

- Put learning into practice: The feedback from the retrospective is useless unless the team actually implements changes in its next project.

Questions?