

Improving the Way You Improve

Michael had scheduled a full day-off for that day's retrospective. When he arrived at the room, he was glad to see that not only the two teams he was coaching were there; several managers had come too. Michael had been working with them for a whole month in order to explain to them the importance of this event.

His teams were uncomfortable. Retrospectives were supposed to be a safe place to talk about impediments, and with all those managers around they were not sure if something had gone terribly wrong and they were going to be punished. Michael noticed the irony of the situation—this kind of behavior and values was exactly what he had to solve.

He started the meeting thanking everyone for their attendance. Then, he dedicated some time to make sure everyone understood that it was a safe environment: they were going to be talking about pretty uncomfortable things that needed to be talked about, and nobody was to be blamed for the problem, defects, impediments, or improvement areas they identified.

He then explained why there were more people than usual in that day's retrospective: he felt that the company culture was a barrier to true Kaizen transformation. He presented some stories about awesome companies achieving incredible transformations and asked everyone to rate their company against those stories. As expected, the marks were very low.

Michael was excited—they all agreed that something was wrong, but what? And what could they do about it? This was exactly the point he wanted to reach.

After a couple of hours, some conclusions started to emerge: it was not a matter of tools or practices, but more of a cultural problem. But where was culture? How did people learn about it? Why did they adopt this kind of culture?

This was a moment Michael had feared, but he decided to take a leap of faith. He confronted them with the uncomfortable truth: culture was set by example. They acted that way because everyone else was acting that way; and, despite the fact that many of those behaviors originated on middle management, the truth is that another big part of them was peer-induced on the production line.

There was a change in the meeting's mood. A moment ago they were engaged and excited, finding and learning, but suddenly most of them were on the defensive—'surely it was not ME who was setting a bad example!'. Michael broke the trend by introducing a couple of exercises and games designed to increase trust and vulnerability. Everyone had to step in front of the group and tell a story on how he or she was enforcing the old culture—the rest of the team had to clap and cheer for him or her as a matter of appreciation and acceptance. To say that it was awkward and uncomfortable would be just a polite way of describing it. But strangely enough, by the end of the exercise the finding-learning mood was back—the guilt and blame moment was over!

Michael felt a huge release. Things were actually going better than he expected. After a short break, they dedicated the next couple of hours to describe a desired cultural state and the purpose of such a change. They described the behaviors they would like to see on their peers and clustered them to identify common values.

Everyone was cheering up and then a manager said 'Well, that was a good job, now it seems time to call the meeting over'.

Michael kept silence for 10 s. The atmosphere turned tense. Then he smiled and said 'No. . . I have made that mistake before, and will try not to make it again. The meeting should not be over until we have an action plan. Right now we have described an improvement goal, but not WHO is going to care about it, HOW are we going to do it, WHEN are we going to be able to work on it, and WHAT is needed. In fact, in order to make that plan, we need to understand not just the goal, but the reasons we haven't been able to meet

that goal in the past, the root causes and impediments that we will be facing. The meeting is not over until we craft such a plan’.

‘But this isn’t all’—Michael continued—‘we’ve crafted plans in the past, only to see that there was not enough time to make them real. The same plan was proposed over and over until everyone forgot and lost interest in it. That needs to end today. The plan we decide together, we are going to make real together. To make sure that it happens that way, I will need you all to commit to a given, structured time, maybe every day, maybe every week. During that time, your duty will be to perform the improvement actions we decided together. Project managers will need to make capacity available for improvement actions, and managers will have to commit to not interfering in the improvement process, no matter how urgent or important they feel about doing something else. In fact, when some people are on vacation, don’t we manage to carry on with the production by adjusting workload, capacity, and deadlines? This will be the same. We will have ‘spare’ time for improvement, no matter how little, and we will consider this improvement time strategic for the company’s future, or we will just stop pretending we want to be Agile or Kaizen-minded’.

The look on their faces was a mix of emotions. They could not believe Michael was actually trapping all of them into his vision, but they were excited to see that someone was actually taking the bull by the horns. Was this the beginning of something?

Michael wished it really were.

The Use and Aim of Kaizen Events

Once again, I must reiterate that Kaizen is not about isolated events and good intentions. The most common Retrospective failure cause I see when coaching Agile companies is that there is no action plan and no follow-up. It reminds me of the good old ‘strategic planning’ events, where a huge investment of time and money was spent to craft a master strategic plan for the company, and then nobody cared about making the plan real—until next year’s strategic planning event. Another good example is the hyperdetailed Gantt chart crafted at the beginning of a project that never gets updated after the kick-off, and thus becomes obsolete and useless.

In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th US president

Kaizen events are an important part of Kaizen, but they are not the whole Kaizen idea. As we established in the first chapters, Kaizen is more a mindset and a culture than a set of defined techniques, processes and tools—which, again, does not mean that there are no Kaizen techniques, processes and tools, or that they are not important.

Still, if you want to start a Kaizen change program at your company, after you’ve had a couple of hallway conversations with early adopters, probably one of the first things you should be doing is to institute some kind of periodic Kaizen event and make Kaizen official.

Kaizen events are used to structure, plan, and check the Kaizen efforts. If we use Deming cycle (plan, do, check, act) as a metaphor, Kaizen events could probably host every activity except the ‘do’. The actual Kaizen improvements must be performed on the production line on a daily basis. You could or even should also plan, check, or act on improvements on the production line: Kaizen is not a one-shot, confined and time-bounded activity, but a whole-life continuous attention to excellence, improvement, and perfection.

In Kaizen events we create improvement plans, check their results, and correct them in order to keep searching for the desired results. We identify impediments, break them into smaller parts, analyze root causes, and imagine ways of getting rid of them. We plan how to implement those ways, and we define strategies for that implementation. Then we can use the same periodic Kaizen events to follow-up on the implementation. We can also use Kaizen events to analyze improvement metrics and define new, better metrics that better suit our needs when the improvement focus switches.

Kaizen events can be compared to the Sprint Planning/Sprint Review meetings in Agile frameworks like Scrum: there’s planning, checking, and correcting, but the plan must then be implemented during the whole Sprint. No actual development is made in those meetings, yet they are important to reflect on and steer the project.

Kaizen events, as opposed to Kaizen, are limited in scope, time bounded, and usually include only a small subset of the company. The aim of Kaizen events is reduced, and they usually seek to build enthusiasm, synchronization, information, and knowledge exchange, bringing different perspectives together and reaching consensus, alignment, and commitment.

It is important to stress the importance of having multiple points of view when looking to improve your company. Companies are complex environments, and so the Law of Requisite Complexity applies: *If a system is to be stable, the number of states of its control mechanism must be greater than or equal to the number of states in the system being controlled.*¹ This means that a complex environment (your company, formed by many individuals) cannot be controlled or improved by a mechanism that is less complex (i.e., just one individual).

Different Kinds of Kaizen Events

Several different kinds of Kaizen events can be used to enhance your Kaizen transformation. There are Kaizen events more suitable for project improvements; others are aimed at functional, local improvement; and still others can have a cross-functional, system-wide focus. There are periodic Kaizen events and one-shot ones.

Some of the Kaizen event formats are:

- **Kick-off meetings:** used at the beginning of projects to create a common understanding of the project scope, goals, success criteria, and so on. Kick-offs can be used to define improvement goals over previous projects and to remember our lessons learned and how to apply them to our next project. The goal here is not to perform new projects the same way we have been performing them in the past, but to search for new, better ways of both managing and executing projects.
- **Project post-mortems:** once the project has ended, there are few things we can do to improve them, but a post-mortem analysis is a good opportunity to learn what we did well, where we failed, and what can be improved in the future. Then, we can prepare ideas and improvement plans to be used at the next project kick-Off.

¹ Ashby WR (1956) *An Introduction to Cybernetics*, Chapman & Hall.

- **Inceptions² or joint application development meetings:** these meetings are a great opportunity to improve our products and our value-generation process. The idea is not to create a product design, THEN show it to the customer, but to create a product design WITH your customer. These workshops include several activities to generate a common vision and gather insights, and they are a great opportunity to define success and improvement from the client perspective.
- **Client feedback events:** similar to inceptions, we only perform them once the project has already started or even when the product is already on the market. Sometimes they take the form of focus groups or customer interviews. The idea is to gather insights on how to improve our service and product.
- **Labs:** one of my personal favorites. The idea is to define a time-bounded space during the iteration where the team can stop working on their current project and spend some time doing research, innovating, learning, or developing their own skills. I usually start with 4 h every 2 weeks, which represents as little as a 5 % time investment. During lab time, there is an endless list of things the team could be doing in order to improve, including the design of new products, proofs of concept, or prototypes; implementing new tools; learning new technologies or techniques; working in pairs in order to exchange knowledge; developing and improving their work standards; reading books and presenting them to their peers; fixing impediments they are not able to fix during regular work time; reviewing each other's work; or developing and maintaining knowledge bases.
- **Backlog grooming:** another interesting activity, especially in very technical or complex environments. The idea is to get some structured time to review the team's backlog and prepare for the next iteration planning meeting so there are no surprises. Sometimes we detect some work package that is coming that we don't fully understand, so we decide we'll be using some time to investigate it before iteration planning, or sometimes we realize that the work packages are not well described, include dependencies with other teams, are too big to be managed, and so on. The idea here is to improve the team's backlog over time and before it's too late to react to the backlog defects.

² A good resource on inceptions is Jonathan Rasmusson's *Inception Deck* at <http://www.slideshare.net/dleyanlin/99-inceptiondeck>

- **Root cause analysis (RCA):** these can be special events where we focus on one given problem and try to find hidden root causes that we have not been able to understand yet.
- **Workouts:** similar to the RCA or even complementary to it, the idea is to get several people together to work on a given problem until they are able to propose an improvement plan. Then, they will usually be asked to implement and follow up the plan. Sometimes they are referred to as ‘Kaizen Blitz’—blitz meaning lightning in German—because of the fast improvement that is sought through this kind of event.
- **Off-sites:** again, similar and complementary to RCA, workouts, and some other Kaizen events—you can combine them all in different ways. The idea of the offsite is that, in order to be focused on Kaizen and not be interrupted by the daily short-term ‘noise’, we move the improvement team to an offsite location, typically with restricted access to mobile phones, laptops, the Internet, and daily tasks.

Agile Retrospectives

Of course, the canonical Kaizen event for Agile teams is the iteration Retrospective.

At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

– Agile Manifesto

Retrospectives are short meetings at the end of the iteration where we typically review what Agile teams call ‘Pluses and Deltas’: things that we did well and we must enforce in the future, things we failed at and we should correct in following iterations. The team or their coach will log pluses and deltas in an Impediment Backlog; then, they will use that backlog to perform improvement activities over the next iterations. Some Agile frameworks even call for some given capacity of the team to be spared over the iteration in order to work at the Impediment Backlog. This ‘improvement capacity’ can take the form of backlog space, lab time or out-of-iteration-focus activities.

Retrospectives are usually an intimate event. If managers, product owners or other stakeholders are present, they can alter the Retrospective results because the team might not feel confident enough to talk about

failures, defects, impediments, problems, or bad behaviors. The need for this intimacy depends on the company culture: very mature companies might want an all-heads Retrospective, but assume that this is very rare and most organizations will benefit from more private Retrospectives—just the team and their ScrumMaster. On the other hand, if nobody knows what is happening at a Retrospective, a feeling of ‘wasted time’ can happen at managerial levels. A good start is to perform the Retrospective in a closed, secure environment, and then create a charter of impediments found and improvement actions planned. This charter can then be disclosed to others.

Teams might choose to invite someone to a given Retrospective. This must not be understood as a lifetime invitation pass. Maybe they need a manager for one Retrospective, but they might not feel that need any more after the Retrospective. Agile coaches must act as Retrospective gatekeepers and make sure that nobody is offended for not being invited to a Retrospective or even for being kicked off.

As said, in a more mature environment—Agile maturity, that is—people can feel confident enough to declare Retrospectives open to all. Agile coaches must make sure that, if this happens, Retrospectives remain honest, transparent and that no topics are actually taboo.

The typical Retrospective dynamic is:

- **Opening of the Retrospective:** welcome the participants, explanation of the set-up, Retrospective focus, and expected behaviors or attitude. It might include an opening exercise—an ice-breaker or energizer.
- **Telling the iteration story:** what happened during the iteration, things we did well, things we did wrong, things that might be done differently. Several information sources can be used for that: the burndown chart, cumulative flow diagrams, notes on the team’s iteration board, happiness indexes,³ or personal team member notes.

Unfortunately, many Retrospectives just end here. Of course, that’s a wrong way of performing Retrospectives. Some more advanced teams will include a couple of steps:

- **Identify impediments:** it might take the form of brainstorming, or they might already be identified and clustered from the iteration analysis.

³ Check the second part of this book for some team activities and tools that will help.

- **Add impediments to the backlog:** impediments will be logged and prioritized. The team will choose some of them and will work on them during the iteration.

And again, this is a good improvement on how to perform Retrospective, but there are still a couple of key points missing.

Retrospective Failures

Of course there are several ways a Retrospective can go wrong, but here are the most usual ways I find when coaching Agile companies:

- **Pluses and deltas:** the team identifies strong practices and weak spots. . . And then what? There is no actual analysis, no plan to enforce the latter and reduce the former, no follow-up mechanism.
- **Groundhog Day Retrospective:** in the cult movie *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray was forced to live the same day over and over. In this Retrospective failure mode, something similar happens: all Retrospectives seem like the same Retrospective. The same problems are identified and reported over and over, and nothing really changes.
- **Playground Retrospective:** the team uses Retrospective time for playing team-building exercises, Agile games, and so on. But there is no real improvement effort. It's just the team's way of dissipating some stress after the iteration, or just some form of 'cargo-cult' Retrospective, meaning that they mimic what other Agile teams are doing or what the literature describes, but they don't really understand why. Hence, they end up performing empty, useless activities, or they just pursue some other goals not necessarily related to continuous improvement.

In the South Seas there is a cargo cult of people. During the war they saw airplanes with lots of good materials, and they want the same thing to happen now. So they've arranged to make things like runways, to put fires along the sides of the runways, to make a wooden hut for a man to sit in, with two wooden pieces on his head to headphones and bars of bamboo sticking out like antennas – he's the controller – and they wait for the airplanes to land. They're doing everything right. The form is perfect. It looks exactly the way it looked before. But it doesn't work. No airplanes land. So I call these things cargo cult science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land.

– Richard Feynman, *Cargo Cult Science*, 1974
Caltech commencement address

- **Wailing Wall Retrospective:** people will complain about how everything is so wrong, but they won't propose action plans. They will usually argue that problems are not their fault and blame management.
- **Weak planning:** the team will prepare some action plan, but the plan will be weak. Usually they will use statements as 'we are going to solve this', 'we are going to work smarter' or 'we will put some effort on it', but then there will be no clue on who, what, when, or how.
- **Leader talks:** the coach or—even worse—some manager will make all the iteration analysis, problem diagnosis, impediment identification, and solution proposal. The team will not feel empowered, nor they will feel any ownership in the improvement process. Kaizen is limited to what the leader is able to achieve on his own. A variation of this happens when the facilitator is too involved and creates a bias in the analysis and the proposals—he will discard ideas that do not match his own.
- **Few people talk:** a variation of the previous type of failure. In this case a few people participate, but some will always lag behind or just be idle. The facilitator is not fostering the collaboration and commitment of the whole team. Maybe there's a hidden team dysfunction.
- **Artificial harmony:** the team's fear of conflict makes them hide real problems. They feel like pointing out impediments or defects will bring conflict and make others feel bad, so they prefer to just let things be as they are.

- **Bad feeling:** Retrospectives are seen as uncomfortable events because all the talk is about failures, defects, problems, and things we did wrong.
- **Too short:** Retrospectives are too short usually because of a vicious cycle—there is not enough time to perform a proper Retrospective, so results are weak, so people think Retrospectives are a waste of time, so they don't use too much time on the Retrospective—and the circle is closed. Some Agile coaches recommend a minimum of 30 min per iteration week (2 weeks equals 1 h). According to my own experience, that is too short and will cause any of the failed Retrospectives modes I mentioned before. My own rule of thumb is closer to minimum 1 h per iteration week (2 weeks, 2 h Retrospective), and usually even more.

Improving Retrospectives

In order to improve Retrospectives, first you have to make sure that you are creating the right environment:

- **Good facilitation:** because of their intrinsic nature, Retrospectives will move people out of their comfort zone and will ask them for answers they don't have at the moment. In such a situation, it is easy for the team to get stuck or to talk in circles around the problem without reaching any meaningful or useful insight. Good facilitation can reduce this risk by time-boxing activities, ensuring everyone participates, providing frameworks and tools for constructive reasoning, teaching everyone how to discuss issues positively, or making teams deal with conflicts. Some good facilitation resources are mentioned at the end of this book.
- **Make it secure:** if people have the feeling that something they say can be used against them, can harm some people's feelings or might create conflict in the team, it's likely that this issues will never come to surface. Facilitators must also make sure that there will be no finger-pointing or blame games during Retrospectives. Many teams start their Retrospectives by writing on their boards Norman L. Kerth's Retrospective Prime Directive.⁴

⁴ Kerth NL (2001) *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews*. Dorset House.

Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.

– Norman L. Kerth, *The Retrospective Prime Directive*,
[http://www.retrospectives.com/pages/retroPrime
Directive.html](http://www.retrospectives.com/pages/retroPrimeDirective.html)

- **Positive intention:** create a climate of nonviolent communication. Watch for aggressive gestures, bad words, name-calling, or personal mean-spirited attacks. Try to maintain the Retrospective in a fact-based state of genuine curiosity—trying to learn, understand and find ways of doing things differently—and don't let the team run into frustration or defensive modes. Teach them how to give good feedback—a good message can be spoiled by a bad form.
- **Enforce participation and collaboration:** everyone must participate in the Retrospective and, even if they don't fully agree on the action plan, some consensus must be reached. This means that sometimes people will be asked to work into something they don't fully believe in. To do so, a climate of trust, collaboration, and teamwork must be grown: sometimes I will trust the team and go for something they believe in; sometimes it will be the other way round. Looking for 100 % buy-in and agreement might make Retrospectives eternal.
- **Solution focused:** be solution focused more than problem focused. The motto here is 'problem talk creates problems, while solution talk creates solutions'. If you focus too much on the problem inevitably sooner or later you fall into negativity. With a focus on solutions, you foster creativity, excitement, and enthusiasm; even more: you will be moving people into action and changes—at least in their minds.

A good Retrospective environment can also dramatically improve the Retrospective results—or kill the Retrospective completely! Some of the environmental factors that can help your team get into 'Kaizen Mode' can be:

- **Isolated space:** safe environment where the team feels free to talk about anything with no 'unwanted ears'. People outside the team coming to Retrospectives without being invited can kill Retrospectives.

- **Out of their regular space:** moving to a different space from the one they occupy during the iteration helps the team move their minds to an observatory/inquiry state.
- **Lot's of idea space:** use whiteboards, walls, even desks. Don't let your team run out of space when brainstorming and expanding their minds! Some space to walk around or stretch is also nice, as is having sofas, armchairs, and other ways of feeling comfortable and even cozy.
- **Props:** sticky notes, adhesive tape, markers, paper, and scissors. And never let the team forget to bring their notebooks—there will be homework at the end of the Retro!

On the other hand, in order to maximize the chances of having productive Retrospectives, there are some steps to be added to the usual Retrospective structure we discussed in the previous section. An improved ten-step Retrospective process aimed to reduce all the failure modes and enforce the desired Retrospective mindset would look like this:

1. **Prepare:** I usually ask both the team and their facilitator: 'don't show up naked at the Retrospective'. This means that, during the iteration, everyone should be preparing topics to be discussed at the Retrospective, measuring improvement, following up on previous plans, etcetera. All this information should be reviewed before the Retrospective, and the relevant data should be brought to it. If there is currently a special or specific improvement focus, the Agile coach—Kaizen agent, team facilitator, leader or similar role—should remind people about it and engage in enough conversations to ensure that there will be something to discuss at the Retrospective. Daily synchronization meetings—stand-ups, daily Scrum, or similar—are a good opportunity to remind people to prepare for the next Retrospective.
2. **Set up:** make sure everyone understands the Retrospective goal and the desired environment of trust, collaboration, transparency, and positive, constructive energy. It's also usually a good idea to 'test the waters' before going on. Sometimes, it's just not the right moment to retrospect and could be a good idea to suspend the Retrospective and do some team coaching instead. If the team is too frustrated or too depressed, you might want to change the Retrospective dynamic on the run (or just postpone it and buy the team some beer).
3. **Remember, remember...** My personal rule is to start reviewing last Retrospective's action plan and see if we were able to perform at least

part of it. If not, there is probably no sense in running a new Retrospective the same way—we should go back to the last one and see what are we failing at when it comes to actually performing the improvement plans! If this means that we don't have enough time to review the last iteration, that's fine: if the Retrospective process is broken, there is no use in doing more broken Retrospectives until we fix them. If we were able to perform some part of our improvement plan, we might spend some time following the plan's roadmap and designing new actions in order to continue improving that way.

4. **Tell the iteration story:** assuming we were able to at least try part of the improvement plan, then it's time to review our last iteration. Facilitators must make sure that, during the iteration, enough information is recorded so we can actually reconstruct the iteration story. People usually rush to 'pluses and deltas' mode, but I always find that some narrative helps the team to put them into the right context—that is, tell me the *story* of the iteration: how did we start, what was our goal, what happened then, how did we end. . .
5. **Highlight events:** after the full iteration story has been told, try to spot the most relevant events that impacted on team dynamics, project performance, product quality, and the overall improvement process. You can cluster them in similar categories, but don't spend too much time analyzing yet.
6. **Divide and conquer:** the first thing is to set a relative priority of the detected impediments. Priority can be established through a corporate strategy, a team-decided improvement focus, or through the use of several frameworks. I usually start by assessing impact on the team versus ability to remove the impediment—high-impact easy-to-remove items come first! Once you spot the top-priority items to improve or, if we are talking about positive impacts, enforce and evangelize to other teams, it might happen that they are too big to be dealt with. In such cases, trying to divide them into more suitable, actionable problems might be a good strategy.
7. **Root Cause Analysis (RCA):** once we have decided to work on a particular item, we should make sure that we attack the roots of the problem and not its symptoms. Read more about RCA in Chap. 5—Process Kaizen.
8. **Plan to improve:** now that we have found actionable issues we can work on, it's time to brainstorm actions we can take to eliminate or reduce them. The plan should, at least, tell us *what* are we going to do,

how are we going to do it, *who* is going to take care of it, and *when* will we perform this actions. Success criteria, improvement goals, metrics, risks, strategic partners, needed resources, or a desired state might also be defined in the improvement plan. The plan should have a special focus on what are we going to do during the following iteration, but it should also include a roadmap after that. Once the plan is set, if we have enough time, we can try to root-cause analyze another issue, following the priority order, and craft another improvement plan for the iteration.

9. **Closure:** for a great Retrospective closure, ask for appreciation and feedback. Appreciation consists of asking everyone to thank one or more team members for their contributions during the iteration. It can be about their work, their attitude, how they collaborated, how they solved an impediment or even about the day they brought doughnuts for everyone: the idea is to enforce behaviors and work on team spirit. Feedback, on the other hand, is about this Retrospective: are they happy with the results? What can be improved in future Retrospectives? How can we make Retrospectives better? What did we do differently that we liked? It is important nevertheless that we assess the team's feelings about any conflict related to the last iteration. Facilitators must try to bring real closure: we reflected about the past, we talked about conflict, we found ways of dealing with this kind of conflict in the future, and now the conflict is over. If the team starts the new iteration still feeling frustrated about the last one, very probably there will be new conflicts—or even worse, we will repeat the last ones.
10. **Follow-up:** as with preparation, daily meetings are a great place to ensure that the improvement plan is being performed. Some teams even create an 'improvement lane' on their iteration boards to keep track of the desired improvement activities, so people get to report on daily meetings about these activities and the impediments they are facing.

A Note on Positive Issues

As I wrote before, 'problem talk creates problems', and the whole Retrospective literature is heavily biased towards deltas—things that we have to solve and problems to analyze. In many cases, it seems that we only list pluses to celebrate and balance the negative feeling created by all the impediments and defects that we detect over the Retrospective process.

The idea, of course, would be to enforce the things we are doing right and to ask ourselves how can we do more of it, what were the root causes of the observed improvement, and what other similar actions could we perform in order to maximize those improvements. We should also care about sharing that knowledge with other teams, something we can do through the communities of practice or with the help of Kaizen agents/Kaizen evangelists.

Another important use of the pluses is to communicate all the small wins to the company as part of the Kaizen change initiative/Kaizen plan. We are trying to build a culture by telling stories, and the stories about what went well, what worked, or what we were able to improve are important stories—stories about success.

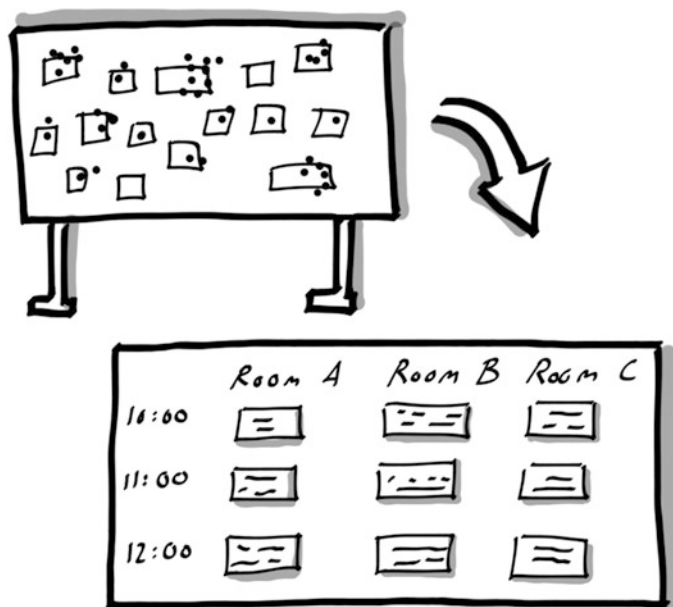
Some examples of positive approaches to Retrospectives and continuous improvement are solution-focused Retrospectives and appreciative inquiry. Solution-focused Retrospectives have a pretty self-explanatory name: the main goal is to explore and define solutions to any problem identified. A solution-focused Retrospective starts with positive formulation—‘I want. . .’ and ‘We should do. . .’ instead of ‘I don’t want’, ‘We should stop’, which would be a negative formulation. Then, it moves into an exploratory stage on what would be the consequences of the positive change we are trying to achieve—how it would affect others. It also tries to figure out how close we are to our desired goal, what made us advance in the past, how can we increase that, what separates us from the goal, and how to overcome that gap.

Appreciative inquiry is somewhat similar in the sense that it focuses on exploring what is the best possible future state for all. This future state should be so compelling for everyone that no incentives, rewards, or persuasion would be needed to make everyone work toward it. The core idea of appreciative inquiry is that just asking people to ‘fix problems’ is not powerful enough to spark and sustain change throughout human organizations, and a commonly accepted idea of what could be—a noble cause, if we think in corporate cultures, or a purpose if we look at it from the motivation perspective—is needed to encourage and support change.

Special Retrospectives

In some occasions, special Retrospectives can be used to enhance the overall Kaizen process:

- **Cross-Retrospective:** there are several ways of doing a cross-Retrospective. One is to run a Retrospective with members of different teams so we can reflect on cross-team collaboration, dependencies, and issues. Another one would be to switch facilitators in order to bring new perspectives and techniques to teams that might be stuck in their thinking process. There's even another way: each team makes a Retrospective on some other team's issue, with no interference from them, so new insights can be generated 'outside the box'. In all cases, knowledge sharing and a whole-system view are the main goals of running such an event. A cross-Retrospective can be followed by a cross-cross-Retrospective, where different cross-teams inter-exchange their results or visit each other's Kaizen boards to learn about their insights.
- **Meta-Retrospective:** or 'Retrospective on Retrospectives'. The goal of this event is to review the Retrospective mechanics and evaluate if we are actually improving or if there is something missing. This whole chapter can serve as a checklist to assess the current Retrospective process of the team and to see if there is something we can fix, change, or add to it.
- **Focus Retrospective:** in this kind of Retrospective the team does not review the whole iteration or the existing improvement plan; instead they focus on just one issue for the whole timebox. It is a useful approach when there is some big, hairy issue that we never seem able to divide or analyze. Focus topics can include impediments, roles, behaviors, processes, tools, technologies, or even cultural issues. Bringing in experts on the topic or other kind of stakeholders can be useful in this kind of events.
- **Connecting the dots:** sometimes the team gets so frustrated with the current state of things that it might be interesting to create a 'roadmap from the past' describing how we have been able to improve over time. The main goal is to identify, revive, and analyze past milestones and crucial improvement events from the past and see how can we achieve similar improvements in the future.
- **Open Space:** this is a massive all-hands Retrospective that can be conducted using the Open Space format. Several topics are proposed by participants. They are dot-voted and prioritized, and the ones with the most votes are placed in a schedule to be addressed during the rest of the session. People are then free to join any group they find interesting, and the proposers of the topics are responsible for hosting the session and wrapping up the results.



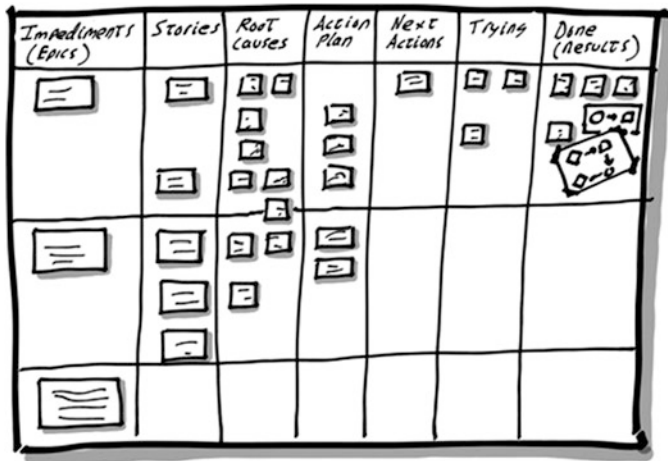
Of course, feel free to combine, modify and experiment on different Retrospective formats, techniques, or scopes that suit your needs! Remember that the goal is not to ‘run Retrospectives’ or even to improve—the goal is to create a *culture* of improvement and, in order to do so, change must be the rule—no change equals no improvement. If you ever feel like you are doing the same Retrospective over and over, do not hesitate to spice it up with any of the approaches discussed in this chapter or the tools and techniques described in the second part of this book.

Communicating Your Improvement Plan

Even if there are still no improvements to show, it is very important that the team communicates the impediments they are finding, the root causes spotted, the action plans defined, and the actions they are actually performing. Sometimes Retrospectives are kept secret for the sake of team trust and team collaboration; but if results are not shared, there is a chance that managers—and the rest of the organization—will start feeling that Retrospectives are a waste of time and that they are only an excuse for the team to goof-off.

A good way of communicating your team’s Retrospective results is to ask your team or their facilitator to craft a poster during the Retrospective,

listing all the major insights that were pointed out. Another way would be to maintain a Kaizen board, where the team lists the Impediment Backlog, root causes detected, improvement plan, and actions performed.



Several other methods can be used to communicate your plan, both push communication—making information reach your audience—and pull communication—having information ready for anyone who wants to consult your improvements. Some other tools and communication formats you might want to try include:

- **Improvement wiki page:** you could easily set up a wiki page and log your Retrospective results, impediments detected, and so on.
- **Improvement newsletter:** a short description of every Retrospective could be e-mailed to a list of interested people and stakeholders.
- **Improvement forum:** an online forum could be created and managed to allow discussion on improvement topics.
- **Kaizen corner:** a fixed place and time to give a short speech about the team improvements to anyone who wants to attend.
- **Coaches community:** all team coaches could perform a short stand-up meeting after all Retrospectives and share a short briefing of their own Retrospectives.

Summary

Kaizen is not about one-shot time-boxed events, but Kaizen events are an important part of any Kaizen initiative. They provide structured time to focus on long-term improvement and can help us build buy-in, grow enthusiasm, bring different perspectives together, reach consensus, and plan for improvement. Of course, Kaizen events must be followed-up, and enough daily capacity must be ensured to carry on the changes and improvements designed at Kaizen events. Daily meetings are a good way to build up momentum, make sure the Kaizen plan is being performed, and deal with unexpected impediments.

Retrospectives are a typical Kaizen event found in Agile environments, and they usually focus on detecting good and bad things that happened during the last iteration (typically, the last 2 weeks). To have really useful Retrospectives, several environmental factors must be present—collaboration, trust, transparency, ownership, security, positive attitude, good facilitation—and a solution-focused, action-driven approach must be enforced. A good physical environment also helps.

Instead of just finding impediments, a good Retrospective focuses on the most important impediments in terms of impact and ability to be solved. The most important impediments are divided and root-cause analyzed in order to create action plans that identify both short-term actions and mid- to long-term improvement roadmaps. These action plans include details such as what is to be done, who is going to do it, what is needed, and when it will be done.

Again, follow-up is key. Communicating the plan and making others conscious of your results and key insights is also very important so everyone can see the benefits coming from the Retrospective. Kaizen boards are a good way to begin communicating your improvement plans, and they help to build a Kaizen culture, while becoming cultural artifacts.

Positive wins and detected improvements are also an important part of the Kaizen initiative, as they can help sustain the improvement momentum and help us define new improvement stories that build the Kaizen culture. Cross-pollination of ideas and knowledge sharing are two factors that Kaizen agents and team coaches must observe—a cross-Retrospective is a good way of approaching this need.

Things to Try

- Make a formal kick-off for your Kaizen initiative, or if you did that in the past consider re-founding the Kaizen plan. Prepare it in advance—you should find plenty of ideas of what you want to tell in this book. Gather all the interested stakeholders and use the kick-off as a first Kaizen workshop to define your desired state, main impediments, long-term goals, short-term action tracks, and follow up structures.
- Ask your people to rate their own Retrospectives. How happy are they with dynamics, scope, and results? Is there anything they are missing? What's going wrong at the Retrospectives? What was their best Retrospective so far, and why? Use this information to foster dialogue around new ways of improving Retrospectives.
- Check the Retrospective failure modes and see if they could be happening in your environment. Ask your people to rate their Retrospectives against them (0—no, we never do this; 10—yes, that's our Retrospective all the time). Ask them how they feel about it—maybe it's not a big deal—but if they feel like improving their Retrospectives, ask them why they are falling into this behavior and how can they move out of the identified dysfunction.
- Review your teams' Retrospective environment and see if it matches the guidelines explained in this chapter. Ask your teams to rate their environment and propose changes or improvements to it in order to have better Retrospectives.
- Introduce the full, improved Retrospective process described in this chapter to your teams. Ensure that they allocate time in the Retrospective for prioritization of issues, RCA, and improvement planning. Make sure they follow up during the iteration—use daily meetings for that. Review the RCA tools in the next chapter.
- Introduce 'Special Retrospectives' as needed—for example, at the beginning of new project (kickoff, inception), the end of project (post-mortem, client feedback), or for dependencies spotted (cross-Retrospective).
- Improve your team facilitator's toolbox and skills—check the list of resources at the end of the book.
- Find a local Agile group—they are pretty much everywhere, and every major city has one. If you cannot find a group or are not able to join one for whatever reason, join an on-line Agile forum, list, or social network. You can then exchange knowledge and information on how to improve

Retrospectives with other Agile practitioners—maybe even invite someone to your Retrospectives or be invited by them in order to learn new strategies, tools, frameworks, and games.

- Design your Kaizen board. Play with the idea—don't stick to a predefined design. Try to make it dynamic and collaborative. It is also important that people outside the team are able to understand what the team is working on: use results-oriented language and make sure that the terms are not too technical.

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