Extracted from:

Agile Retrospectives

Making Good Teams Great

Chapter 10

Make It So

Productive teams judge retrospectives by their results.

It would be lovely if we could just say “Make it so” for every change, like Captain Jean-Luc Picard on the Starship Enterprise. But “Make it so” isn’t enough. Action plans set the stage for results. Incorporating experiments into iteration work plans makes sure they receive attention. And sometimes it’s still not enough.

If you’ve ever tried to change a personal habit (nail biting, for example) you know that it’s virtually impossible unless you have something else to replace the old behavior. It’s easier to add a new behavior than extinguish an old one. The same is true for teams and organizations.

At their retrospective, Lynn’s team resolved to stop jumping into coding without a plan. But at the next iteration planning meeting, two team members popped open their laptops to share the code they’d worked on over the weekend. They believed they were giving the team a head start.

Lynn reminded everyone about their agreement and shared several ideas for planning that he’d read on an Agile discussion group. The team agreed to stick to their resolution and try Lynn’s ideas for planning. As the team began talking through the work they needed to do, the team realized that the code written over the weekend didn’t contribute to the team’s goal for the iteration— it was wasted effort.

Without a replacement (planning ideas, in this case), the team had no alternative but to fall back on their old behaviors.

Any new behavior feels awkward at first. People develop ease through practice—whether learning a new tennis serve or learning coding in a new language. Provide support and reassurance that it's okay to make mistakes as people try new skills.

10.1 Provide Support

The work of creating a change isn't done when the retrospective is over. Even small changes need to be nurtured and supported. Support comes in different forms: reinforcement, empathy, learning opportunities, practice opportunities, and reminders. Certain kinds of support can come from the team—empathy and reminders, for example. But other support requires resources and a budget. Team leads, coaches, and managers have responsibility for obtaining support that involves expenditure.

Reinforcement Change is difficult. Support your team (and yourself) by noticing progress. Give encouragement on what is going well: "Our new unit tests are helping us keep the build clean—way to go!" When you encourage your team, you acknowledge the challenges and boost morale.

Provide information on what's going well to help your team recognize that they are making progress. Be sure the feedback describes behavior and states the impact: "I noticed that yesterday we stayed on track in our stand-up meeting. We agreed to stick to our four questions, and we did. That really helped me see what the obstacles were."

Empathy Acknowledge that people's feelings of loss or frustration are valid. Here's how Fred, a team lead, mishandled the situation when a team member came to talk to him about a change. Fred listened as Katie explained how she felt about giving up her private cubicle when the team decided to move into an open work space. "I've thought about it," Fred responded, "and there's no reason for you to feel that way." This is *not* empathy. Acknowledge the other's point of view and feelings (without agreeing to fix the situation). Simply saying "I hear you" can be enough.

Learning Opportunities Demonstrate support for exploration and learning. Your team may need to learn new skills to succeed with the experiments they've chosen in their action plans. Organize brown-bag lunches and sharing sessions where team members can learn from each other. Provide lists of web resources and articles for team members to investigate new ideas. Look for informal mentors inside and outside the team. Encourage pair programming to learn new coding languages and techniques. You can do all this without a budget.

Be willing to spend money to support the change. Not every skill can be learned from website or an article. Invest in training to build a foundation for new skills. Build a library so your team has ready access to resources.

Practice Opportunities People need practice to gain proficiency. One way is to turn the team loose on the product to try something new. Another option is to make a formal practice space using a short-short project, a practice area, or a Hello World program.

Create a short-short project—one lasting a day or two, or even less—to explore possible solutions or try a new method. If your team is having trouble timeboxing, starting with something small like a short-short project can serve double duty. The time limit on the short-short project creates an explicit checkpoint where the team can assess their learning and decisions about the experiment.

A practice area is a place where the team can try something new without affecting the real product. The practice area can be a special test or development area that's not used for current product development.

Encourage the team to try Hello World programs. Hello World programs are simple—typically they do nothing more than print or display "Hello World." But they can test development environments and configurations and find problems quickly (or confirm that the basic concept works).

Reminders Big visible charts and check-ins are reminders that help your team focus on changes. For example, Terry's team decided to they needed to refactor more often. They created a large chart where each team member posted a green dot when they finished a refactoring task. At the end of each day, they reviewed the chart and discussed the results. The chart kept refactoring conspicuous.

A check-in lets the team report on what they're doing with a particular change. Keep the questions and answers short: "In a word or two, how are we doing on estimation?" Use the responses as a gauge of how the new practice is going.

10.2 Share Responsibility for Making Changes

When one person consistently grabs responsibility for action items, three problems emerge:

- Your team may come to look upon one team member as a heroic rescuer. The rescuer may rely on the heroic role for emotional reasons—to the detriment of the team. Whether the team relies on a rescuer or a rescuer seeks the role, the dynamic kills collaboration and shared ownership.
- When a formal or informal leader consistently takes responsibility (except for system problems outside the team), that person teaches the team to be helpless victims. Collaborating to make improvements strengthens the team. Taking away that responsibility cripples them.
- When a team consistently assigns responsibility for problem resolution to a subgroup within the team, it creates a perception that the subgroup is the source of all problems. Scapegoating breaks the team. Share responsibility, and rotate change leadership.

10.3 Supporting Larger Changes

Iteration retrospectives usually generate compact changes—changes that the team can accomplish in the next iteration or stepwise over a few iterations. Larger retrospectives can generate broader changes that take longer to implement. Broader changes require more support and more attention to how people respond to change.

People experience predictable transitions as they let go of the old and take on the new, even when they've chosen and planned the change [S+91], [Bri03]. When a change is perceived as small, people adapt without external support. For larger changes, the transition takes longer and happens at different rates for different people. Understanding the four phases of change will help you support your team.

Four Transitional Phases in a Change

These are the four phases:

Loss Starting something new always begins with letting go of the old. People experience loss—loss of competence, territory, relationships, certainty. Excitement about the new may pull them through this phase quickly, or they may take longer to adjust. Either way, they can't, and won't, move forward until they let go.

Chaos Letting go of the old doesn't mean we fully understand the new. People feel confused and strive to reorient themselves during a time of change. They explore how things will change and what this new way will mean for them. Along with confusion, chaos may spark innovation and creativity. People may invent new approaches because the rules aren't settled yet.

Transforming Idea Eventually, people see or experience how this new way will work for them. Experiments and exploration lead them to a fresh understanding. An outside influence may bring a new perspective. Team members begin to try new behaviors and ideas.

Practice and Integration An idea is not enough. People need to practice to learn a new skill or adapt to a new structure. Performance may drop initially but will improve with practice.

As people move through the stages of change, help them by attending to these three areas:

What People Value Identify what team members valued in the old way. Look for ways to carry the value forward while leaving behind what isn't working. By acknowledging what was valuable in the old way, you recognize that people were not stupid or wrong. At some time, someone thought it was a good idea, and it was, then. People move forward more easily when they believe that changing doesn't imply they've been stupid.

For example, during their release retrospective, Lakshmi and her team realized they needed to increase their team size by 50% to keep up demand for their product. They were excited that their products were so successful, but they also felt the loss of their small, cohesive team. As they brought in new people, the team lead worked to clarify the team's values and the practices they wanted to keep. The original team prioritized what was most important to carry forward as they grew into a larger team.

Temporary Structures Temporary structures help people navigate the chaotic phase between the old way and the new way. Temporary structures can be plans, roles, meetings, methods—any mechanism that bridges the current state and the goal state.