



Think Introspective, Not Retrospective— Why Wait Until the End

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Organizations use project retrospectives to assess the success of their development practices and projects. They also serve as a closure vehicle for the project team and can be a celebration of good projects, or final escape from bad ones. Retrospectives are intended to provide information about where changes in development and project management practices, responsibilities, communications, and deliverables could benefit *the next project*. While information from previous projects remains invaluable when planning the next project, it does not provide timely information to make improvements on a current project. In fact, project retrospectives are about as useful to the team in identifying improvements after the project is complete as doing usability testing after the team hits code complete—you find out what's wrong with the current product at a time when there is not much that can be done about it. That's where project *introspectives* come in. Not only do they take less time to perform than a final project retrospective, more importantly, they allow for timely improvements on existing projects!

The project introspective allows the project team to assess what is and is not working and make mid-course corrections. By reviewing the current resource requirements, schedule and scope attributes of the project and comparing them to the project's current projected value, the team identifies what improvements are needed to succeed in the remainder of the project. Introspectives are conducted at the conclusion of each development iteration (whether the milestone for that iteration was met or not) or when there is a significant change in scope. The findings from the project introspective assist the project sponsor and stakeholders to understand whether the original business case for the project was realistic and to determine if and where their assistance is needed.

The project introspective is an excellent vehicle to revisit and validate assumptions about features, resources, and schedule made earlier in the project. However, during the introspective, it is key to remind the team that the purpose is to gather facts, not place blame. Undoubtedly, some of the assumptions made earlier in the project will be wrong: the introspective should be initiated with this expectation. The goal of the review is to uncover the invalid early assumptions, revise them in light of actual project experience, and evaluate the impact of the revisions on the project's scope, budget, and schedule.

The focus of the project introspective session is to discuss problems that arose and decide if they could have been anticipated, the earliest they could have been detected, and what could have been done to minimize the impact. The question each team member should ask of themselves is: **What do I know now that I wish I had known then?** Were there practices that could have been in place to provide an earlier warning? Or, were the early warning practices in place but no one was paying attention? "The Court of Inquiry found



that the Project Self-Destruct Light had been flashing for 16 months, but it was on a console in a locked room and no team member had been issued a key.” During the session the following artifacts are used to analyze project history and to help assess what actions, if any, should be taken:

- Prioritized feature list for this iteration including an assessment of the level of completion, stability, and performance of each of the features;
- Iteration plan status (features mapped to iterations and change items);
- Change log and rate of change requests versus the team’s ability to assess and implement those changes;
- Error tracking database identifying find-fix rates and severity levels;
- Risk log indicating nature of risks, mitigation tactics, and contingencies; and,
- Team participation and commitment levels (were the skill sets and hours made available as anticipated).

Introspectives are a good time to remind the team that when using an iterative development approach, you do not “catch up” to the original schedule: something must change. If a feature set wasn’t completed successfully in this iteration decide which features in future iterations need to be scaled back or cut completely from the schedule to accommodate this slip.

In addition to identifying problems and areas of improvement, introspectives also show what is working well for the team:

- Were the objectives for this development iteration met?
- Did the iteration meet user requirements and expectations?
- Were there problems after integration?
- Were there project management or administrative problems?
- Which practices were successful?
- Which practices could use improvement?

Remember, the time to assess what’s working and what’s not is while the project is still underway and success is still possible.