RETROSPECT

/ In-depth reflection on project experiences, to improve results /

WHAT IS A RETROSPECT?

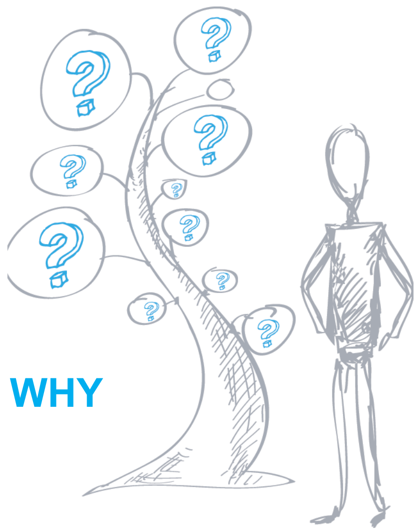
A Retrospect is a process to capture team-based learning from an important project/ initiative of any kind, upon its completion. The goal is to identify key success factors and recommendations for continuous improvement and more effective future action. These are turned into a knowledge resource, for use by the team or by others when tackling a new project cycle or a similar initiative in the future.

A Retrospect ideally occurs soon after a project/ initiative concludes, or sometimes at major project milestones. Team members meet face-to-face to revisit the project's purpose, objectives and deliverables, and trace the proposed plan against what actually happened, in depth. The Retrospect identifies the key factors and actions that contributed to success or failure, and helps ascertain, in detail and across all relevant project activities, what could be done to improve results in the future. The recommendations that come from a Retrospect have been validated by the experience of the team.

The Retrospect and the After-Action Review (AAR, described elsewhere in this Toolbox) are complementary: The Retrospect is for in-depth reflection and comprehensive learning at the end of a project or at major milestones, focuses on its overall outputs and outcomes, and produces a formal meeting record and lessons learned that are written up and disseminated. By contrast, the AAR focuses on specific activities, is for short-term learning and quick course corrections at any point during a project, and results in an informal and typically very brief action plan shared within the project team only.

REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator, not previously involved with the project and having solid facilitation skills*
- *4 – 12 people: members of project/initiative/programme team*
- *Flipchart*
- *Cards and marker pens*
- *2 hours or more (up to a full day for major initiatives)*



WHEN AND WHY TO USE

A fundamental method for achieving continuous improvement in any work activity is to reflect on what has been done, in order to find ways to improve results in the future. The Retrospect and the After-Action Review are powerful reflective tools that offer simple and systematic approaches to improvement. They can be combined: A project can include several quick moments of reflection (AAR) with a final in-depth analysis (Retrospect). Both tools can be applied to any area of team-based work where improvement is desired and possible. [1]

If done correctly and regularly, Retrospects can lead to an increase in openness, the establishment of a learning culture, and an increase in performance focus.

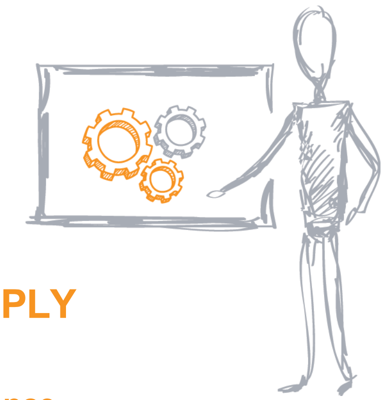
The best candidates for a Retrospect include:

- Projects/ initiatives that consumed a lot of time and/or resources.
- Pilot or demonstrative projects (because they will be scaled up).
- Projects that were seen as very successful, or ones that 'failed' (although appropriate acknowledgement of sensitivities is needed to ensure that the Retrospect does not become a 'blame game'; remember that it is not for audit or performance evaluation).
- Projects that were in any way innovative – either in terms of issues addressed, population groups or partners involved in the project, new ways of working, or any other innovative aspect of work.

The primary outputs of a Retrospect are recommendations for future action. These recommendations are based on the team's knowledge of what worked, what didn't work, why, and insights into what could be done differently next time. For this reason, a Retrospect offers great value when the same team or Office will be undertaking similar work in future: in this case the lessons will be both easier to assimilate (because team members were part of the project themselves) and easier to apply (because they will be involved in a new, similar project). However, the recommendations resulting from a Retrospect can also be useful for other teams or organizations conducting similar work.

A Retrospect is not an audit tool, nor should it ever be used for performance evaluation; doing so would undermine the openness and sharing spirit which is essential for success. Neither should it be taken as a way of writing reports. In a Retrospect, learning takes first place.

[1] The pairing of short After Action Reviews with a single Retrospect at the end of the project follows the methodology of Knoco; see References. Agile software development methods use a technique called the 'Retrospective', which is most similar to the After Action Review rather than the Retrospect.



HOW TO APPLY

Prepare in advance

These instructions are for the organizer of the Retrospect.

1. **Schedule a Retrospect soon after the conclusion of the project/ initiative (or achievement of a major project milestone), ideally within 1-2 weeks.** This means you will need to be thinking about when to hold the Retrospect even before the project's/ initiative's conclusion.

- **Conduct the Retrospect as a face-to-face meeting**, not over email or via teleconference.

- **Allow sufficient time at the Retrospect for all team members to share their learning**. This typically requires 15 - 30 minutes per team member, based on the project's complexity and the participant's level of engagement. In total, you will need from 2 hours to a full day.

- **Engage a facilitator who was not involved in the project.** Such a facilitator will be in a good position to ask probing questions and get meaningful responses. If a project leader acts as facilitator, then participants may give the responses they believe the leader wants to hear, which will impede learning.

- **Facilitators with very limited background in the subject matter of the project may need to do some preparatory reading and have a few preliminary briefings, before the Retrospect,** with the project leader and key participants. These briefings should focus on the background, stakeholders, timeline and results of the project, and potential areas of improvement. They should also cover any possible sensitivities among the project team, in order to help the facilitator keep the Retrospect focused on learning rather than 'blaming'.

2. **Invite participants and observers.**

- **Invitations should come from the project leader(s)** and should clearly state the rules and objectives of the Retrospect, emphasizing that it is a learning exercise and not an audit or performance review.

- **Participants should include the project leader(s) and members of the implementation team, including outside partners, up to a maximum of about 12 people.** If community members or beneficiaries were involved as implementers, then they should also be invited as participants. Choose community members with the maximum degree of involvement in actual implementation.

- **If the number of participants would exceed 12, then either invite only the key players, or – if the project work can be suitably divided – organize Sub-Retrospects** on different aspects of the project (see 'Variations' below for details). Sub-Retrospects may be necessary if there were many project stakeholders that had key roles

- **Designate a rapporteur (or two rapporteurs, if the Retrospect will run more than 4 hours or if the topic is very technical) to record the conversations and learning at the session.** Taking notes is essential for creating the key output of the Retrospect: the meeting record, which summarizes the recommendations for future action. Taking notes is also required for producing other potential Retrospect outputs, such as briefs, guidelines, lessons learned reports, checklists, etc.

◢ Consider inviting up to 3 - 4 observers. The Retrospect is conducted for the benefit of future project cycles or similar undertakings elsewhere in the organization. The presence of observers from other similar projects, whether planned or ongoing, can sharpen the focus on the Retrospect's learning objectives. But sometimes it can also inhibit the free sharing of experiences and insights, especially when the project addressed sensitive issues or ran into significant challenges, or if the observers are senior or influential. Weigh the benefits and, if you do decide to invite a few observers, they do **not** count against the suggested limit of 12.

3. **Ask the project leader(s) to prepare 2 short (maximum 15 minutes, perhaps shorter) presentations.** The first covers the context, objectives and expected deliverables of the project. The second summarizes what actually happened: the results achieved, whether objectives and deadlines were met, and any relevant measurements. The second presentation could also include a draft timeline of the project; see reference to the Timeline tool below. Both presentations may be circulated in advance, or presented only at the Retrospect.

4. **Book a room.** If possible, maintain the context of the project by organizing the Retrospect in the project meeting room. If that is too small, then find a larger meeting room ideally with a round or oval table that seats all team members.

5. **Prepare the agenda.** As a rough guide, aside from a 10-minute introductory segment and time for breaks and lunch, allocate your available time at the event (from 2 hours to 1 day) as follows.

- What were the objectives: 10% of time
- What was achieved: 25%
- What went well, and why: 25%
- What could have gone better, and how: 25%
- What still puzzles us: 5%
- Project rating (see below), closing and session evaluation: 10%.

When you are ready to start

These instructions are for the facilitator.

6. **After welcoming participants and doing any needed introductions, briefly summarize the objectives and methods of the meeting for all:** The Retrospect is for learning and improvement of future action, not for performance review or reporting. It achieves these objectives by means of transparent, open sharing of experiences, impressions and insights; and joint reflection on lessons and recommendations for the future.

7. **Ensure the rapporteurs are ready to record all significant points made by the participants, and in particular the key recommendations for future projects. Then conduct the Retrospect by posing a series of key questions:**

◢ **What were the objectives and intended deliverables of the project?** You may also ask related questions including: What did you set out to do? What was the vision at the start of the project? What were the intended deliverables?
Begin the answer to this question by having the team leader deliver their first presentation (on the objectives and context of the project; see #3 above), or simply have a list of objectives posted

on a flipchart. Then hold a group discussion to identify whether there were any differences in the understanding of the objectives among team members. If so, these may suggest important lessons.

- **What was actually achieved?** Related questions include: Were the deliverables produced? Were deadlines met?
Have the team leader deliver their second presentation (summary of results; see #3 above), or post a summary on a flipchart. Then hold a group discussion to ensure that the team has a fairly complete and shared understanding of the results.
For more complex projects, create a Timeline (refer to the Timeline tool in this Toolbox for guidance) to help identify the key events, milestones, actors, external factors and obstacles. The process of jointly piecing together what actually happened in the project helps draw out knowledge that would have been hard for any individual working alone, even the team leader, to pinpoint.

- **What went well? Why?** Related questions include: What were the moments or actions that were most important for success?
This is an open discussion to determine the important successes and the key factors that contributed to them, so that these can be sustained or recreated in future projects. Ensure that each participant gets a chance to contribute, and that you stay on schedule. Often people may not immediately realise why things worked out well. It is often useful to ask 'why' more than once for every success, in order to get at the real reasons. This will stimulate reflection, deeper insight, and possibly also prompt the realization that not everything went as well as possible.
Don't linger on the routine, expected successes; they can be mentioned, but spend most of the time focusing on the successes that appeared uncertain earlier on, or those that were bigger than expected, or those that were achieved with unconventional approaches.

- **What could have been improved, and how?** Related questions include: What internal obstacles, and what external factors, hindered the project? How could they have been overcome? Knowing what we know now, what would we do differently to improve results?
This may be a difficult or sensitive portion of the discussion, so ensure that all participants understand the objective as finding recommendations for future improvement. This will help get objective responses without assigning blame. **Ask the project leader(s) to speak first. A leader's openness about challenges encountered and ways to improve will help dispel discomfort among team members about discussing negative aspects of the project.**
After the leaders give their inputs, give each participant a chance to speak. Encourage the contribution of practical ideas for change, and ensure that you stay on schedule.

- **Is there anything that still puzzles us?** Related question: Are there still any relevant project-related issues that we don't know how to address?
Don't spend too long on this part of the session, but do include it as it is potentially very valuable for guiding future research, planning and action. Some participants may feel uncomfortable with admitting that there are unanswered questions, just as they might with discussing how things could have gone better. Don't force participants to contribute; rather, just give them the opportunity.

8. Optional: Create action plan. If (and only if) there is an opportunity for the team members present to immediately apply the recommendations from the Retrospect, then the group can create an action plan. The action plan should be as simple as your organizational context and objectives allow it to be.

9. Conclude the Retrospect. Tie up any loose ends from the discussion of the project. Let participants know about next steps, including the need for their comments on the draft meeting record (see next item below), and anything else relevant regarding future actions. Then ask participants to share their impressions of the session.

◢ **Optional but recommended: Project rating.** When concluding the project discussion, ask each participant to rate the project on a scale of 1 to 10. Then ask each what would have been needed for them to give a rating of 10. This represents a final opportunity for participants to raise any lingering issues.

Follow-up after the event

These instructions are for the organizer.

10. Have the meeting record written up. Refer to 'Annex: Meeting Record' below for a suggested structure for the document. Compile the meeting notes and edit them into a single meeting record, summarizing the proceedings and stating the lessons and clear, practical recommendations for the future. The record should be sufficiently clear and well-written that it can function as a resource document for someone starting a new project cycle. Share the draft meeting record with participants for comment and to ensure their views are properly reflected.

◢ The written meeting record, with clear and practical recommendations for improved action and results, is the most concrete output from a Retrospect. In addition, a well-run Retrospect will yield in-depth team learning and improvements in team cohesion and transparency.

11. After final edit, make the meeting record available: If confidentiality is an issue, then share it on an internal site or community with limited access. But otherwise share it widely, e.g. by posting it on an intranet site or community site that is accessible to all staff, or on a website accessible by both staff and partners.

◢ In addition, you can also distill the recommendations into other knowledge, capacity building and communication resources, and disseminate these widely to different audiences as needed. For example, lessons learned can be captured in any suitable format, including official lessons learned templates that may be used in the organization.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

◢ The most fundamental tip for success – applicable to the work of the organizer, the facilitator and the project leader(s) – is to ensure that all participants clearly understand ahead of time that the Retrospect is a time for learning, and that it will be assumed that 'everyone did as well as they could in the situation they faced.' Maintain this perspective during the meeting, and ensure that the discussion reflects it. Otherwise, learning will not be possible. Performance issues should only be raised in the context of individual performance reviews. Do not use the Retrospect for performance evaluation; doing so will likely ensure failure.

◢ It is easier to succeed with a Retrospect if the project itself succeeded; if the project leader truly wants to learn and share; and if the project team communicates well and has strong team spirit. If only some or none of these are true, then it is still possible to have a successful Retrospect but it will be more challenging and will demand significantly more skill and effort from the facilitator.

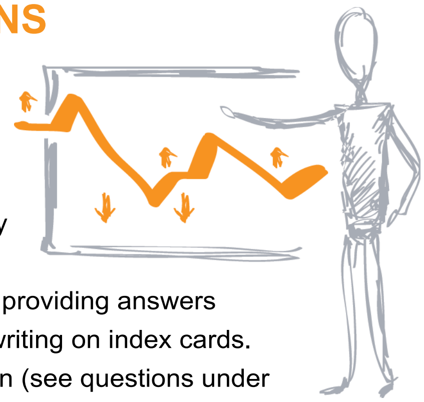
◢ Be careful not to delve too much into the micro-level lessons. A Retrospect is not an After Action Review; it has a broader and more long-term focus.

◢ Look for ideas for improvement that are both specific and actionable. If some ideas seem promising to the group, but are still general or vague, try to sharpen them up, e.g. instead of 'we should be on the ground quickly' try for 'the emergency team should be on the ground within 24 hours'.

◢ Ensure the conversation stays focused on the process and results, not on the roles of specific persons. If comments start to become personal, remind the group of the Retrospect's purpose and bring the discussion back to the process.

◢ Be sure to give everyone an opportunity to talk. Don't let the conversation be dominated by the loudest voices. One way to give everyone an opportunity to speak – especially in cases where there are domineering personalities – is to introduce a "talking stick": only the person holding the talking stick may speak while others must listen.

VARIATIONS

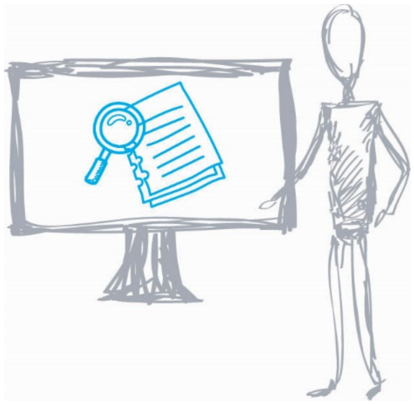


◢ **Providing input on cards.** Some teams may be more comfortable with providing answers to questions by writing on index cards. For each question (see questions under #7 above), the facilitator gathers the cards, reads them out, and then organizes the responses into themes with the group's help, writing them on a flipchart. (See also VIPP Card Collection and Clustering elsewhere in this Toolkit.)

◢ **Sub-Retrospects:** If you have too many key team members (i.e., more than about 12), begin the Retrospect in plenary with the summary of the objectives. Then divide the team along functional lines, project components or phases and run multiple Sub-Retrospects, each of which will review progress and ask what went well and what didn't, within their respective spheres. Each sub-Retrospect will need a facilitator and a rapporteur. Depending on the design of the session, you may wish either to use breakout rooms and convene at the beginning and end in a larger room, or use a single room with movable furniture that can be configured as needed. Reconvene briefly at the end to close the meeting (as described above). A single meeting record should be prepared from all sub-groups' inputs.
If you use Sub-Retrospects, then ensure that the rapporteur of each group uses the same methods for recording the discussions (e.g. a flipchart, computer-based note-taking, group members writing on cards, etc.) This will greatly facilitate aggregating and/or comparing the outputs of the various groups.

◢ **Video summary:** As an additional output, team members with insights to share may be invited to give a short 2 minute video comment/interview that is made widely available for viewing within the organization.

CASE STUDY / EXAMPLE



Example: UNICEF's Nepal Earthquake Response

The example below is drawn from UNICEF's emergency response work. In addition to creating recommendations for future action it also identified immediate actions relevant for participants in the response. The Retrospect was adapted for organizational context by engaging management through a subsequent review process, and also by inviting additional input from staff not present at the Retrospect, via a Wiki. These additional elements are not obligatory for a Retrospect; rather they illustrate how it can be adapted when necessary, without compromising the fundamental principles outlined above.

After the first few weeks of the emergency response to the April 2015 Nepal earthquake, the UNICEF Nepal Country Office decided that a Retrospect would offer a critical learning and stock-taking opportunity. Therefore a one-day Retrospect was organized on 26 May 2015, just over 4 weeks into the response. Participants included members of the UNICEF Country Management Team, District Emergency Coordinators and staff from the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, all of whom were involved with the response.

In order to broaden the range of available inputs, one week prior to the Retrospect all staff involved in the response (whether invited to the Retrospect or not) were given the opportunity to provide feedback on what was working well and what challenges were being encountered, through an anonymous online Wiki platform which received more than 230 contributions.

The Retrospect had the following objectives:

1. Assess the **effectiveness** of the immediate response during the first 4 weeks after the earthquake, highlighting in particular the strengths and weaknesses of the actual as compared to the planned response;
2. **Contribute to improvements for the ongoing response**, yielding immediate action points for key response participants and strengthening the focus on rehabilitation, resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction;
3. Identify recommendations for UNICEF staff to **strengthen future humanitarian action**, by analyzing strengths and weaknesses of the response and why they occurred, and drawing out lessons on what to sustain and replicate, as well as what to do differently next time.

At the Retrospect, an external facilitator guided participants through a day-long process of assessing progress to date against the 90-day response plan, looking at what had worked well and why, what had not worked well and why, and formulating concrete recommendations for addressing bottlenecks to strengthen response moving forward.

The Retrospect resulted in a set of proposed recommendations by staff for improving the emergency response. The recommendations were reviewed by management, who subsequently decided which of them would be acted upon and how. The follow-up actions to implement recommendations were thereafter tracked as to their status, who is responsible and by when.

REFERENCES

Denning, Stephen. "Introduction", in Get Better Faster: The Ultimate Guide to the Practice of Retrospectives. OpenView Labs, 2011.

Collison, Chris and Geoff Parcell. "Learning to Fly". West Sussex: Capstone, 2001.

Greenes Consulting. "Guide to the Retrospect Technique– A Proven Method for Learning After Doing". http://www.atmc.org/Resources/Documents/GC_Retrospect%20Guide.pdf, accessed 3 May 2015.

Kerth, Norman L. Retrospectives.com. http://www.retrospectives.com

Knoco. "Retrospect". Knowledge Management Reference, Knowledge Management Processes. http://www.knoco.com/retrospect.htm

Milton, Nick. "Breakthrough KM proof of concept- case study". Knoco Stories. http://www.nickmilton.com/2014/10/breakthrough-km-proof-of-concept-case.html

Young, Tom and Nick Milton. "Knowledge Management for Sales and Marketing: A Practitioner's Guide". Oxford, UK: Chandos Publishing

"After Action Reviews and Retrospects" EC-FAO Food Security Information for Action Programme e-learning course: Collaboration and Advocacy Techniques http://www.fao.org/elearning/course/FK/en/pdf/trainerresources/PG_AARRetrospects.pdf

CREDITS

Authors: Meena Arivananthan.
Author of example (Nepal earthquake response): Diksha Mudbhary-Sitaula.
Editor: Eric Mullerbeck.
Executive Editor: Ian Thorpe.
Expert Review Panel: Kerry Albright, Paula Bulancea, Neha Kapil, Lina Salazar, Edgar Tan.
Design: Olga Oleszczuk.
Production: Edwin Ramirez.

September 2015.

Contact: Division of Data, Policy and Research, UNICEF
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA
knowledgeexchange@unicef.org

This Toolbox in its latest edition, as well as all individual tools, are available online for free download at http://www.unicef.org/knowledge-exchange/

Annex: Meeting record

Every Retrospect should result in a meeting record – a document summarizing the discussion and capturing the recommendations. Below is a suggested structure for the document. You may include additional headings as required by your organizational context, but keep the document fairly simple so that it will be easy to create and easy to read and use.

Name of project

Date of Retrospect

Retrospect participants:

Team leader(s)

Team members

Facilitator

Observers (if any)

Summary of project objectives
Base this on the team leader's presentation at the Retrospect

Summary of project results
Base this on the team leader's comments and the discussion. Keep it short: it is a summary, not a report.

What went well

What could have gone better

Recommendations
These are drawn from both the discussion of what went well, and from the discussion of what could have gone better. Present them as brief statements or short paragraphs.

(Optional) **Unanswered questions**

(Optional) **Supporting documents**
These may include ToRs, monitoring reports, notes from project meetings, etc., if available and relevant to the recommendations (don't include them just for completeness).

If a Timeline is prepared during the meeting, it can be captured with photos.