Retrospectives with large projects and (or) multiple teams

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Abstract

Retrospectives are one of the most integral components of any agile methodology. This helps the team in continuous improvement.

Retrospective with a single team or small group is simple. It is a different ball game altogether when this has to be scaled up to a large audience or multiple teams.
Following is the experience report of scaling this activity to multiple teams and with a large audience.

Introduction

We had a new product to develop which we started with a single scrum team. Because of the huge backlog another 3 teams were asked to work on it. Apart from the normal four scrum teams we had a UI team helping them. There were two more important stakeholders -Business development team and management.
This was the most important initiative of the year 2012.

Each team had its own retrospective. They also had Scrum of Scrum. But even then there were problems like
- Communication
- Adaptation of technical practices
- Understanding of technical practices
- Workflow Feature breakdown across multiple teams
- Combined demo of feature to clients

In many occasions team had to work late night hours to bring the project under control.
After the first phase of delivery it was decided to have a program level retrospective to find out the issues which we couldn't solve at each team level.

Retrospective Format

This was the format used for the large retrospective. After the initial success this was used again in other programs also.

Meeting Preparation

Set the Goal

Setting a right goal for retrospective is very important. It helps the participants to come prepared. This was easy for us because of all the problems we faced.

Advertise

- Posters were put in team work area, cafeteria, notice boards etc.
- Email invitations were sent to block the calendar

Duration

Blocked two days for this large retrospective

Gather Data

This retrospective was done after six months the teams have started working on the project. Because of this long gap people may forget the important events of the initial iterations. To bring the right perspective we asked the teams to gather old data. It could be the meeting notes, emails, events, documents, bug count, anything which can contribute to the discussion. (This will be used during the timeline stage)

Working Agreements

Scrum Masters worked with teams to finalize set of working arrangements which is agreeable to all the teams.

Invitations

- Circulated the working agreements and objectives of the retrospective.
- Created an itinerary and emailed the participants.

Venue

- Booked a large room with lot of free space so that people can move around.
- We removed the posters and other items on the wall to make space for sticking the retrospective items
- Put the retrospective goal and working agreements in a place which can be seen by everyone.
- We also arranged light refreshments at the venue.

Opening Day

Setting up the stage

Introductions

It will be a big crowd with many new faces. To make all comfortable we setup some time for self-introduction.

Agenda

After the quick introductions the retrospective leader talked about the agenda and reiterated the goals. We also reminded everyone about the working agreements.

Vision and emotions

During this stage we invited the key stakeholders to explain the vision of the project.
After this we invited others to explain their view about the success of the project. A general voting with raised hands was used to identify people's perception of success of the project.

Data Gathering

Timeline

Chart Papers were pasted across the walls
During this stage, asked the participants to create a timeline of events on post it notes and stick it on the walls. They could use all the data which they have gathered. Some even pasted the meeting notes directly to the chart paper.

Story telling

With the help of the participants volunteers explained the whole timeline to the entire gathering

Generate Insights

Identify topics for discussion

Discussion points

Asked the participants to refer the timeline and think of important events.
- Good things which should be kept
- Areas which needs to be improved
- Any topic which needs group attention or worth discussing

Sorting

Common topics were stacked together and they were arranged under different themes.

Grouping

Divided the gathering into multiple groups/teams and assign different themes to them. Groups brainstormed among themselves to identify the discussion point and story behind the topics in their theme. After the group discussion volunteers from each group explained the points of their theme to entire group.

Prioritize

Gave different colored (red & blue) dot sticky notes to everyone present; they were asked to do a dot voting on the topics in different themes.

Separate votes for

- Positive ideas/process which helped the team
- Areas which needs to be changed/improved

Same topic can get both votes

Action Items

After the dot voting

- Took the top 3 topics for discussion in different themes. Both red and blue topics were considered.
- 5 Whys and Fish bone technique were used. Teams could use any other method also.
- For the red topics asked the group to brainstorm to find the root cause and working solution which could be adopted by the group.
- For the blue topics team identified ways by which it can be replicated again.
- Group presented their findings and discussion points
- During discussion the group as a whole agreed to the action items

Formalize the action items from the discussions and assign people to monitor the progress.

Track the action items

- Formalized a plan to update the progress of the action items taken to the entire group
- SharePoint site was created to track the progress of the discussion.

Close the retrospective

- Summarize the event
- Read out the key learnings from the event
- Ask for any quick suggestion to improve the gathering next time.
- Provided contact detail of the key people whom people can contact with suggestions and concerns
- Appreciate everyone's effort and participation.

Conclusion

Large retrospectives are very successful in large enterprise environments. This helped us to

- Apply the improvements made at each team level to the whole program
- Find inefficiencies which were not visible at individual team level
- Brainstorm and find solution to some common issues across teams.
- Provides a platform for teams from different backgrounds/departments to interact.
- Provide a common focus and improvement plan across teams.
- Learn from the success/failure of the program which could be applied to other programs.
- Continuously improve as a big group.