Retropoly for leaders and coaches

What is it?

Retropoly is a game to be played during retrospective meetings of Agile teams, based on the Monopoly game concept. It is mainly designed for Scrum teams, but it is suitable for any other Agile methodology. The game is basically offering a fun, yet practical, tool to apply the twelfth principle of Agile:

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

From a leadership perspective, Retropoly is offering an excellent opportunity to practice team coaching in a relaxed, fun and meaningful manner.

Please read the game instructions before. Understanding the coaching tips depends on the knowledge of game rules and roles.

How can you coach the team?

Apart from supporting the usual retrospective ceremony, where team members are mainly concerned with identifying the improvements they can bring to their collaboration process, Retropoly is offering the occasion to achieve some other secondary, yet important, leadership goals:

Encouraging an honest self-assessment of own performance

Whenever a Player is rolling the dice and the pawn lands on a "Moment of Truth" square, he/she needs to consider one aspect of own practice that was not so great during the last sprint, to expose it to the entire team and to figure out future actions that will provide the necessary corrections.

In that moment all the other Players will realize that they might also be in the same situation, landing on a "Moment of Truth" square, and in their mind they ask themselves: "what was the aspect that I need to improve? how can I improve it?". In time, as they learn the game, the Players will get the reflex of thinking about these aspects in advance, before the game starts.

This reflection moment is very powerful because it triggers a genuine self-assessment process, which is very important for building the right mindset of an agile team where not just the team has to retrospect about their collaboration process, but each and every member of the team needs to inspect and adapt its own practice.

The leader/coach that is present (usually as Game Master) must pay attention to the usual flaws of self-assessments: finding excuses, blaming others, minimalizing own contribution to the problem, self-indulgence. If such issues appear, the leader/coach must promptly react and take the appropriate coaching actions.

Encouraging positive feedback between colleagues

Whenever a Player is rolling the dice and the pawn lands on a "Say Thanks" square, he/she needs to think about one person (preferably from within the team) that helped him/her during the last iteration. The Player must then explain to the team what was the help (as concrete as possible) and why he/she is grateful for it.

In that moment all the other Players will realize that they might also be in the same situation, landing on a "Say Thanks" square, and in their mind they ask themselves: "whom should I say thank you? who helped me and I should be grateful to?". In time, as they learn the game, the Players will get the reflex of thinking about these aspects in advance, before the game starts.

This is how the team members learn to offer and receive positive feedback to and from their team mates. Such a habit is very important for building the team cohesion and the feeling of solidarity, which are essential for developing that sense of common accountability that lays at the foundation of an agile team mindset.

The leader/coach that is present (usually as Game Master) must pay attention to the usual flaws of thanksgiving: sarcasm, irony, using the opportunity for self-praising etc. If such issues appear, the leader/coach must promptly react and take the appropriate coaching actions.

Improving the practice of discussion moderation

One of the most difficult things in facilitating team meetings is keeping the discipline of the participants. Although rules are usually stated at the beginning of the meeting, there are always smaller or bigger issues during the allocated time. Members of the team feel the temptation to talk excessively, to start lateral conversations, to deviate from the main topics, to lose focus in favor of personal thoughts etc.

Retropoly offers some sort of therapy for that, in the sense that every team member is experiencing directly how difficult is to moderate a discussion when participants are not following the rules. This should make everyone aware of why meeting discipline is important. Also the Debate Facilitator has the chance to improve its own skills in moderating a discussion.

The Game Master (presumably a leader of the team) must explain to each Debate Facilitator what went ok and what not in his/her moderation effort (achieving a conclusion, time boxing, insuring a fair chance to participate and contribute etc). This is a good moment to slip in some advices for the entire team about moderation and meeting discipline. Also the leader/coach has an excellent opportunity to observe the skills and/or progress of each team member.

Improving team ability to take common decisions

Teams have often difficulties to take common decisions, mainly because a lack of balance of the roles played by its member in the decision process (Belbin roles, 6 Thinking Hats, aso). Developing this ability and training team members to naturally cover all the aspects of the decision making steps is not an easy task.

Retropoly offers this opportunity during the game, as for each debate they have the team members need to end with practical conclusions. This repetitive exercise is building their capacity to decide quickly and correctly.

The leader/coach has a good chance to observe and support the improvements made by the team, offering advice or presenting them challenges that will lead the team to an improved ability in common decision making.

Refreshing knowledge of theoretical aspects

Every team needs once in a while to refresh their theoretical knowledge about agile, about their own practice or about some practical aspects of their organization that impact their daily work. Convincing team members to review theory and/or internal standards is not easy, because it is rather boring. Retropoly is turning this moment into a small contest, providing a much funnier way to refresh the theoretical knowledge.

The leader/coach may positively manipulate this part, by promoting on top of the Challenge Cards (before the game starts) those cards that contain questions about topics that need to be reviewed and refreshed in the mind of team members.

Knowing each other better

Building team solidarity and cohesion is not a simple task and it is based on close relationships between the members of the team. In order to get closer, team members should know each other at a personal level. Of course there are many ways to achieve this, such as teambuildings. Retropoly is offering a small contribution to this effort.

When a Player land the pawn on a "Get on Stage" square, he/she must take the next Stage Card and follow its instructions. These instructions refer to some simple personal things that reveal a little bit about that person: personal hobbies, favorite music or books, etc. Thus team members learn about each other at a personal level.

As the team is progressing with personal relationships of its members, the leader/coach should replace the Stage Cards with more sophisticated ones. One cannot tell indefinite stories about personal hobbies :-)

Having fun while discussing serious matters

Finally, working in teams should be fun. Retropoly offers numerous occasions for giggling, laughing and being joyful, while still debating about the serious and real issues of the collaboration process in an agile team.