



SANKOFA LEARNING DESIGN

Retrospective

A Project Manager's Field Guide to Building Team Trust

Practice the moves in the simulation. Reference them here.



THE SHAPE OF THE MEETING

Five phases, in this order

The order is the point: build safety before you ask for truth, find the “why” before you commit to fixes, and close clean.

1

Set the stage 5–10 min

Name the blameless frame and the safety baseline. State plainly that the objective is a better process, not a personal audit.

“This room fixes systems, not people. Here’s a call I got wrong this cycle…”

2

Gather data 15–20 min

Rebuild the timeline — milestones, metrics, and the sentiment shifts alongside the hard numbers. Silent brainwriting first, so senior voices don’t anchor the room.

3

Generate insights 20–25 min

Find the “why” behind the data. Isolate process bottlenecks, communication breaks, and tool limits — root causes, not symptoms.

4

Decide action items 15–20 min

Convert insight into owner-assigned tasks. Every item is measurable, owned by one person, and realistic for the next sprint — framed as a 2–4 week experiment.

5

Close the session 5 min

Summarize the systemic changes agreed on, name next steps, and thank the team for the candor. The close is what makes the next retro safe.



IN THE ROOM

Seven moves — the tell, and what to say

Each move answers a moment you can feel coming. Catch the tell, make the move.

1 Set the ceiling

Tell: the room is quiet, waiting to see how you'll run it.

"We're here to fix the system, not audit people. Here's a timeline call I got wrong..."

2 Decode the hedge

Tell: "probably fine," "should be okay," a quick change of subject.

"'Probably fine' is doing a lot of work there — what's the part you're least sure about?"

3 Reward the flag

Tell: someone volunteers an early risk before knowing if it's real.

"Thank you for calling that out early — that's what keeps us safe. What do you need to run it down?"

4 Reframe the blame

Tell: a "who" question, a finger pointed at a person.

"Let's put the person aside — where did the handoff break down?"

5 Break the silence

Tell: dead air after an open question — no one unmutes.

"Five minutes — everyone types what slowed us down, no names. Then we read them together."

6 Sequence the retro

Tell: you're tempted to jump straight to fixes.

Hold the order: safety → data → insight → actions → close.

7 Match the model

Tell: the room's mood tells you which format it can bear.

Steady team → Starfish · risky next phase → Sailboat · silent room → Premortem.



TWO CHEAT SHEETS

Reframe the blame · choose the model

Blame points backward at a person. A reframe points forward at the process the room can actually change.

Blame — look backward	Systemic reframe — look forward
"Who approved this configuration?"	→ "What process check let this slip through?"
"Whose script missed the bug?"	→ "Where did the handoff documentation break down?"
"You should have caught this in review."	→ "What would make this easy to catch next time?"
"Why didn't you flag it sooner?"	→ "What made it feel unsafe to flag?"

Which retro fits the room

Starfish

Keep · More of · Less of · Stop · Start.

Use when: a steady team needs to fine-tune a process that already works.

Sailboat

Wind (accelerators) · Anchor (bottlenecks) · Rocks (risks ahead).

Use when: the team heads into a risky next phase and needs to see what will speed or sink it.

Premortem

"It's six months out and this failed — write the story of what went wrong."

Use when: the room is silent or over-confident and won't name a single risk.



BEFORE, DURING, AFTER

The trust checklist

Run this quietly around every retro. Trust isn't asked for — it's built by making the room safe enough to tell the truth.

● Before the meeting

- ☐ Publish the blameless ground rules in the invite — a look-forward frame, not an audit.
- ☐ Set up an anonymous input board so no one fears looking negative.
- ☐ Draft one premortem prompt in case the room goes silent.

● During the meeting

- ☐ Surface your own bad news first — model the vulnerability you want.
- ☐ Run five minutes of silent brainwriting before any open discussion.
- ☐ Catch the hedges — treat “probably fine” as a signal, not reassurance.
- ☐ Reward every flag the moment it's raised, before judging if it's right.
- ☐ Reframe every blame attack from the person to the process.

● After the meeting

- ☐ Frame every action item as a 2–4 week experiment, not a permanent policy.
- ☐ Publish owners and deadlines within 24 hours.

Weekly self-check

- Did I treat at least one hedge as a signal instead of reassurance?
- Did I thank someone for an unverified flag before knowing if they were right?
- Did I keep a checking loop pointed at the goal rather than at what went wrong?
- Did I change a process based on an honest disclosure instead of issuing a reprimand?