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SIMPLE EXERCISE, POWERFUL RESULTS

by Linda Rising

I n his book, *Project Retrospectives,* Norm Kerth describes a simple exercise called Offer Appreciations. When he first told me about it, I thought it might be a good experiment, since I was just learning about retrospectives. However, way back in the mid-'90s, my focus was on mining best practices from our agile development projects, so I didn't get excited about the exercise. It seemed a little too "fluffy" for me, and it didn't hold much promise for capturing pattern insights. It took years of experience with this exercise before I finally saw what powerful results it produced.

In the exercise, team members sit in a circle so everyone can see everyone else. The exercise uses a protocol: Person A says to Person B, "B, I just want to say thanks for [describe something that B did for the team]." B can only reply with "You're welcome" or say nothing (a common response). I typically demonstrate the protocol by making up something and "appreciating" someone in the group, and then I remove myself from the circle to avoid having the team members tell me about what happened. It's interesting that this tendency is so strong, especially in technical people. It's difficult to look someone in the eye and say what we are feeling.

Initially, I thought that teams would like the exercise. It's always good to recognize accomplishments; it makes people feel better.

Then, slowly, over time, with many different teams, in many different organizations, I began to notice things. Teams that had been dysfunctional, with team members who were flippant about everyone and everything, late to the meeting, making jokes (even though I have guidelines about that), and sitting together in little sub-groups—such that I had begun to despair that nothing useful would come out of the experience— began to get close, look at one another in a different way, smile, cry (yep, I've seen it), and be unable to finish a sentence because of rising emotion.

At first, I thought that what I was seeing was an anomaly. I made excuses instead of learning from it. In fact, what I saw was that, as a result of doing Offer Appreciations, things got better.

Here are some specific examples. The day started off with half of the team arriving very late. When the tardy members showed up, it was clear that they were the younger, less experienced members of the team and that they knew they hadn't accomplished as much as they had hoped. They weren't failures, but since it was their first assignment on their first job, they had wished for success—and not just success but a shining, startling success that they could hold up through their careers and that would keep them going.

Instead, their project had failed and they didn't know what to do with that failure. So they made a lot of jokes and perhaps thought, "If I don't take this too seriously, then it can't really hurt me."

Progress during the retrospective was painfully slow, so it was more out of desperation than anything else that I thought about Offer Appreciations. I almost didn't do it because I thought they would end up poking fun at each other and at the exercise, which would just make things worse. When I suggested that team members sit in a circle so they could see each other, they began to make faces and didn't show any signs of settling down. I gave my example of the protocol and then stepped aside, not expecting much. The appreciations began immediately.

One of the young upstarts said to one of the older veterans, "When I came on the team, you were great about helping me get started. I was fresh out of school and thought I knew a lot, but I got buried right away and you helped me. You didn't laugh at me or make fun of my mistakes. Thanks for that." I was floored. I could hardly move. I found I wasn't breathing properly. I waited to see what would happen next.

The appreciations went on for twenty minutes. This team had so much pent-up stuff to get out. This was the first time I had seen tears in this exercise. One of the newbies started to say something and couldn't finish. I stepped in and said, "We can come back to you. Are there other appreciations?" And he did recover. And he added his voice to the chorus. What a song. I can still hear it when I think back to that time; it forever changed that exercise for me.

Another instance: Some time later I was helping a team through a retrospective. The team included a really old guy (my age!) who came in with everyone else but sat by himself in the corner. The company provided a really nice catered lunch, but he left the room to eat the lunch he had brought with him. He would not participate in any of the exercises, and I simply let him be. I finally began to think I might try Offer Appreciations, just to see what would happen. He didn't join the circle at first, but after people had been expressing appreciations for a few minutes, he came over. At the next pause, he stood up, looked around the circle, said, "Thanks for putting up with me," and sat down. He was fine after that. He joined in, talked, participated with the others. Again, I was stunned. What was going on?

Over time and after seeing so many examples of this magic, here's what I have concluded. When we become part of an organization and join a team for the duration of a project, we typically are cast in a role. Sometimes we have contributed to the definition of this role.

We're the Java guy or the database guy or the old guy or the new guy. But sometimes the role is thrust upon us and, even if we don't like the characterization, we step up. We may not be happy about the role, but we don't know how to get out. During retrospectives, especially during Offer Appreciations, we have a chance to put aside that role. We can become the person we want to be. We can stop the jokes or the bad behavior. There hasn't been a way to do that in the past. Even if we have wanted in the deepest way to get off the train, there hasn't been a way. Now it's offered, just by sitting in the circle and saying how much we appreciate what others have done.

Psychologists tell us that the best kind of appreciation is specific—the more detail about what was contributed, the better. Instead of saying, "Thanks for everything you've done," say, "Thanks for spending all weekend working on that database problem. If you hadn't done that, we wouldn't have been ready for the customer demo on Monday morning. You made a big difference in how the customer saw our next release."

We also know that the person who expresses gratitude benefits as much as—and perhaps more than—the person who receives the thanks.

Research has shown that when we say something to another person—an appreciation of their contribution, for example—our brains are listening and thinking, "Oh, I'm saying this to Fred. I must really believe that he has done a lot for our team, and I'm honestly grateful for that." When everyone does that, it changes the character of the team. Team members end the exercise with brains more attuned to how well they all contributed and how important they all are. Teams move up to a higher plane after an experience like that.

I'm guessing that you think I've gone over to the "fluffy" side, but here's the really interesting part. The fluffy side isn't so fluffy anymore. Results can actually be seen on MRI scans. It's the real reason I like investigating these strange results. It's as technical as the most technical piece of anything we do and, in fact, it may be the foundation for everything. **{end}**