

The “Thieves of Time” Retrospective

All systems have waste. It's because of those dang [laws of the universe](#), sometimes known collectively as "There Ain't No Free Lunch."

I coach my teams to practice the art of [Kaizen](#) - to become aware of the drag in their systems and address things incrementally, and sooner rather than later. (See: [Snake on the Board](#)) so they can achieve more flow.

I always suggest that they put on their visual thinking caps to see things through pictures in addition to verbal thoughts.



The pursuit of improvement in this way is powerful – it gives an organization the ability to move toward a new desired state through often unclear and unpredictable territory by being sensitive to and responding to actual conditions on the ground.

It is a lovely cycle, solving one issue to expose the next one. Practiced regularly it enables teams to continuously get better at delighting not only their customers, but themselves as well.

"Excellence is the gradual result of always wanting to do better."

And there's one waste that is particularly egregious. While a team can rollback a code push that didn't go well, refactor a feature that didn't hit the mark, the one thing they can never recover is lost time.

Making the Thievery Visible

I offer this retro technique as a way to help make their lost, actually stolen, time observable. When they can see it, they can provoke meaningful conversations about the thievery inside and outside the boundaries of the team. The team and their stakeholders can then experiment with ways to address the system that allows the time bandits to operate at the levels they do.

The Set Up

Start with a simple three column retro format, (title the columns in a way appropriate to your culture):

- What's going well (e.g., Liked, Happy, Glad, The Good Stuff)
- What's could use some improvement (Lacking, Sad, Pain, Want, Waste, Needs Improvement)
- Who deserves a shout out? (Props, Kudo's, Gold Stars, Celebrations)

You'll notice we're wrapping the nasty with the good. Yeah, a crap sandwich, but in this case, I think we can work with it.

Divergent Brainstorming

Individuals write up stickies silently, and near the end of the time-box, I'll have them post their notes in the appropriate column.

I try to make sure that the middle gets populated really well. A double- or triple-patty poop sandwich.

If I sense that there's more lurking beneath the surface, I prompt: "This is your time to rant about the things you usually just mutter about. Come on, get it out." And extend the time box 2 minutes.

Review the Good Stuff

I then invite the team to take turns reading aloud "the good stuff." I encourage them to elaborate, clarify, and/or question. (I save the kudo's read-out for the very end...)

Put the Bad Stuff into Cells

Now, I explain we're going to tackle the middle column - starting by affinity grouping the stickies.

I draw a six square grid, title it "The Thieves of Time" and label the squares as follows:

1. Too much work in progress (WIP)
2. External dependencies (unknown, cross-team, bus factor...)
3. Unplanned work
4. Conflicting priorities

5. Neglected work
6. Other

The first five cells come via a wonderful concept Dominica DeGrandis shared: *The Five Thieves of Time*

- Agile Uprising podcast link
http://traffic.libsyn.com/agileuprising/Dominica_DeGrandis.mp3
- Goes live on 1/28
<http://agileuprising.libsyn.com/exposing-time-theft-making-work-visible-with-dominica-de-grandis>

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These bandits steal our teams' joy as well as their time. I don't care what industry you're in. Nor the technology you use. And your system size doesn't matter. If you're part of this universe, ya gotta deal with these crooks.

I have the team affinity group the stickies from the "bad stuff" column into one of these six cells. (First person puts a sticky in a cell. Next person can move an existing sticky elsewhere or put a new note into a cell. Limit the number of times something can be moved.)

Chances are the team will sort all the nasties into cells #1 through #5. However occasionally we'll discover a 6th bandit. If we have issues in cell block #6, I ask the team to come up with a name for it.

Identify the Ringleader

I then ask the team if they can see a clear cell that calls out "start here." The density of stickies often makes the choice obvious.

If there's not a clear winner of pain, I'll have the team dot vote cells (3 per participant) to pick the one bandit to wrangle during this retro cycle.

Why These Thieves Exist

Focusing on the one, big, bad bandit, I then ask the team:

- What elements of this thief's *modus operandi* does the team have control over?
- What don't they have control over, yet? (Stress "yet"... it's an important nuance.. trust me)
- What are the motivations for putting up with this crook?

This last question is where the big money is. Understanding and being aware of the reasons why the team allows this thief to exist is paramount to them eventually coming up with ways of dealing with it.

In her book *Making Work Visible: Exposing Time Theft to Optimize Work & Flow* Dominica offers the following ideas for "why":

1. The first reason is pretty basic: as team players, we don't want to let our tribe down, and we get endorphins from saying yes. From being heroic... doing the impossible.
2. The second reason is fear - perhaps of humiliation or worse, getting fired. (There's a whole separate "[Fear and Vulnerability](#)" retro to unpack this)
3. The third is that we do stuff for people we like.
4. The fourth reason relates to the fact that people are optimistic, which leads us to think we can finish tasks faster than we actually do. (Another law of the universe: [Hofstadter's](#))
5. And finally, the fifth reason is that starting something new and shiny is way more fun than doing the grunt work to finish something old and unglamorous. Squirrel!

As a coach, I'll tap into the above reasons as lines of inquiry to help the team if they get stuck understanding the "Why." I do my best to avoid leading questions, but sometimes I fail... (Don't judge me too harshly, please.)

Action Item: Shine the Light on the Thief

This part of the retro focuses on how the team can make the problem (more) evident to all involved. It's the primary output... the action item... the initial experiment. **What will we do to make the invisible visible? Every day. Not in the monthly powerpoint deck. Not in the weekly status report. Every day. BIG and VISIBLE.**

I ask the team to come up with some ideas, some visual methods they can use to shine a spotlight on this thief. Ideas that have come up in past retros:

- Give the task board a bit more color... add more swimlanes... or get some yarn to indicate all the dependencies... or create status columns for all the wait time. (What, you don't have a kanban?!)
- Build a wall of "hotfixes requested by VIP's"... tied with another metric, like Team Mood, the sprint burndown or regular print-outs of the CFD.
- Track daily personal context switches via hash marks on a post-it next to your monitor, or count the priority changing work that arrives right after a "hey, have you got a couple of minutes...?" slack message.

Depending on the energy in the room, and the maturity of the team, I might stop at this point - with just the action items needed to bring that ring leader out into plain sight.

For only once those things are front-and-center to all involved, can the team really start meaningful conversations with the right parties, and design experiments aimed at disarming the bandits, to changing the status quo.

Or if there's energy left, we might brainstorm some potential changes to stop the crime spree. DND time. Pomodori. "Everything must have a ticket." Update the WIP limits. It kinda depends.

Wrap Up with a Reading of the Kudo's

I'll then end the retro with an up-beat: Sharing the kudos. And maybe some chocolate. Folks should be ready for it by now.

Rinse and Repeat

We'll likely never be done fending off the five thieves. But at least we have created a practice to enable teams to reveal these buglers of time. Until now they have been lurking in the shadows, picking our pockets, and stealing our joy.

Variations: Team Resets

This retro is useful also for a team reset. Identifying where things have really gone off the rails, and then putting in place a 30/60/90-day plan to get things back on course.

Tools to Change the Status Quo

Browse around my website andycleff.com for an array of tools, exercises, and practices to help create good change:

- Energize **People**
- Empower **Teams**
- Align **Constraints**
- Develop **Competence**
- Grow **Structure**
- Improve **Everything**

Read more:

- Degrandis, Dominica. Making Work Visible: Exposing Time Theft to Optimize Work & Flow ISBN: 1942788150
- Actionable Agile Metrics for Predictability ISBN 098643633X

Related:

- Fear Vulnerability Retro - <https://www.frontrowagile.com/blog/posts/109-the-fear-and-vulnerability-retrospective>
- Saying “No” - <http://www.andycleff.com/2016/08/saying-no-at-work/>
- Magic of Pi - <http://www.andycleff.com/2015/03/scrum-estimating-and-planning-and-the-magic-of-pi/>
- Progress Principle - <http://www.andycleff.com/2016/08/agile-the-progress-principle-and-a-healthy-inner-work-life/>
- Team Metrics: <https://www.frontrowagile.com/blog/posts/69-30-metrics-for-agile-software-development-teams>