

# Creating a Blameless Retrospective

A Blameless Retrospective is a chance for colleagues to get together and review a production, a shoot, or any other distinct aspect of a project and consider what happened, why it happened, how the team responded, and what might be done differently or the same in the future.



In every Blameless Retrospective, there should be an underlying assumption people are capable of growth and processes, and systems can always be improved. It avoids the idea that all challenges are due to individual negligence or bad intent. Focus is kept on the production's capacity, not an individual's lack of skills.

So, no one person gets singled out for something going wrong and no one person gets to take credit for things going right. It helps to take emotion and fear out of the reflection and allow space for people to find more efficient and more effective ways of working together. Because it's blameless, it means people are reflecting on *incidents, interactions, processes, and results* without fear of hurting someone's feelings or being attacked. The idea is to focus on facts of events and avoid personalizing issues, minimizing risk of retaliation and damaged relationships.

Everyone's voice counts in a Blameless Retrospective. Whether someone is a producer, grip, cast member, makeup artist, or production assistant, if they are included in the meeting, their voice matters. All participants are welcome to name concerns and to contribute to solutions. It's vital to ensure that no one voice dominates a Blameless Retrospective – it is a collaborative, non-hierarchical process aiming to see concerns from a wide variety of perspectives so that improvements can be made and success increased.

A Blameless Retrospective is an agile activity. That means it can happen at any time people think it would be helpful. Most often, Blameless Retrospectives are pre-planned, so they happen at regular intervals during a project or production. They can also be ad hoc, if an incident occurs that needs to be addressed.

## **Why to do it**

Holding a Blameless Retrospective or a series of Blameless Retrospectives creates a culture of continuous improvement. It dedicates time and space for folks to come together and think about ways they can improve their work dynamics and processes without confrontation, which in turn leads to better work and better products. And, because it is about the facts of events, not people, it creates more safety for folks to raise concerns early and address issues before they become endemic in the production.

Blameless Retrospectives can review both things that went sideways and things that went well. By including things that went well, the Blameless Retrospective is a useful tool to highlight what to focus on for strength in the future or what the team should look to replicate.

It's important to remember that a Blameless Retrospective is not meant to replace individual kudos or accountability. There will be times when someone should be praised for going above and beyond or for doing something incredible that helped the production. And there will be times when work stalls because an individual is not fulfilling their role or is not abiding by the Guiding Values Agreement of the production. These aren't the subjects for a Blameless Retrospective – they are performance conversations led by a supervisor. A Blameless Retrospective is for continuous improvement, upholding healthy workplace culture, and uncovering common themes or underlying issues that may be leading to production challenges.



## Improving equity and inclusion on set

Every person participating in a production will feel a different level of comfort raising concerns. This will be informed by multiple factors, including identity factors that affect how society perceives them such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more. Check out the video microlearning series on Screen Access Alberta to learn more about topics like Power and Privilege and Intersectionality.

**Focusing on issues instead of people helps everyone be part of the solution**

By having a standardized forum to raise concerns and feedback that is not personalized and stays solutions focused, a Blameless Retrospective helps to level the playing

field for diverse team members to raise issues without fear of retribution. It may take a few Blameless Retrospective meetings before someone who has historically been excluded or made to feel unsafe to speak, but by consistently seeking and then actioning feedback, safety and trust can be built over time.

Also, because the Blameless Retrospective focuses on issues, not people, it helps to avoid a culture of blaming and shaming that might make people feel further excluded or unsafe on a production. It contributes to a culture of continuous improvement and learning where mistakes are examined and rectified, instead of weaponized against different groups.

Finally, a Blameless Retrospective allows anyone from the team – be it a meeting of everyone on the production, a cast meeting, or a department meeting – to be part of the solution. This opens the door to creative solutions based on diverse perspectives, needs, and lived experiences to be considered when assessing how to move forward. Everyone has a voice in a Blameless Retrospective, so no one way of thinking dominates how solutions are developed.

# Running a Blameless Retrospective

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## Set a schedule

The first step to establishing a culture of continuous improvement for your project is to embed Blameless Retrospectives into your production schedule. Make time and space for meetings and stick to the schedule. Knowing that Blameless Retrospective meetings are coming and are a priority for on-set leaders helps cast and crew prepare and build trust in the process.

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## Invite the people

The Blameless Retrospective meetings should be considered part of the workday to encourage everyone to attend, union members or not, and to show the production's commitment to the process. Attendance doesn't need to be mandatory, and discussion might be better if it's voluntary, but you do want to be clear that participation is encouraged and honest, timely, solutions-focused feedback is welcomed for the benefit of individuals working on set and the production as a whole.

Blameless Retrospectives can happen with any group of folks on set – they can be for the production team as a whole, by department, or by unit. Choose whatever is right for your production scope and scale.

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## Choose a facilitator

Each meeting should have one person facilitating the discussion. Now, that's different from leading the discussion. The facilitator is there to ask questions and draw out ideas, not to dominate the conversation or drive an agenda. As you start to host Blameless Retrospectives on your production, consider having a department lead facilitate the conversation to show commitment to the process. It's also good to rotate the facilitator role, so everyone has a chance to both lead a conversation and to contribute as a participant.

The facilitator should start by welcoming everyone and setting the stage for the conversation. It is their job to ensure the discussion stays on topic and is, in reality, blameless. This can be done by revisiting the intention of the meeting at the start and correcting people who may veer into blame-focused comments right away, so that the ground rules are clear.

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## Open the conversation

To open the conversation, the facilitator can simply ask if there's anything that anyone would like to raise. It's always a good idea to have a few issues at the ready to help get conversation going. They can be things that went well or things that didn't. For example, "it took us longer than we had scheduled to get set up this morning; can we discuss what happened?" or "we wrapped early every day last week; can we discuss what helped us to do that?"

**Ask questions to improve, not to set blame.**

The facilitator can use prompts like "what went well and why?", "what could have gone better?", or "what obstacles came up?" to help keep the conversation moving.

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## Talk about issues, not people

Again, it is up to the facilitator to ensure people discuss processes, procedures, and systems, not people. This might be obvious, like "we didn't get the shot because Jimmy didn't know how to set the lights properly and other people had to fix it" and it might be indirect like "we didn't get the shot because the lighting was handled poorly." Both approaches need to be stopped and reframed to maintain both the safety and purpose of the retrospective. "We didn't get the shot because the lighting wasn't set in time" would be a more appropriate contribution and one that can be addressed without blaming anyone specifically.

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## Encourage problem-solving

The next step of the meeting is to generate ideas about how to resolve concerns or replicate positive incidents. This will likely happen naturally in conversation, but if it doesn't, it is the role of the facilitator to ensure the team identifies ways to improve the production going forward for any issues raised.

At the end of the meeting, the most senior person in attendance should confirm what will be done, when, and how. This is called making actionable commitments.

This can range from very practical solutions like “going forward, we will set call times for grips 10 minutes earlier and new call sheets will be distributed tomorrow” to ones that show a commitment to action, even if the action isn’t defined yet, such as “I will talk to the Producer this week and propose these changes. I’ll report back to everyone at next week’s meeting on what happened.”

Other people at the meeting can and should also make actionable commitments as relate to their roles and the solutions generated. This fosters collective accountability for everyone to the new agreement.

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### **Wrap it**

To close the meeting, the facilitator should thank folks for being forthcoming and solutions-focused, and remind everyone when the next Blameless Retrospective will happen. At the next meeting, the facilitator can start with a check in on how actionable commitments from the last meeting went. Repeat the process for a meeting and continue the cycle of continuous improvement.

## **The key principles of a Blameless Retrospective**

We can’t say it enough – Blameless Retrospectives focus on issues not people. This is vital to creating safety and finding inclusive ways forward for the cast and crew of any production.

Blameless Retrospectives are solutions focused. The purpose of the meeting is to find ways to replicate positive workplace dynamics and processes and repair negative ones.

The meeting, the issues raised, and the resulting actions are not about retribution or consequences. If an issue that requires corrective behaviour arises, that is a performance conversation, not the discussion for a Blameless Retrospective.

In a Blameless Retrospective, all attendees should be welcome and encouraged to identify concerns or to propose solutions. Diversity of perspective is vital to moving forward.

All Blameless Retrospectives proceed with the assumption that people did the best they could with the information and resources they had. This is an opportunity to better equip and prepare the team as a whole to meet the objectives of the production.

## Frequency

The scope of your production will inform how often you can or might need to hold Blameless Retrospectives. It's a flexible process and should fit seamlessly into your schedule. Do keep in mind that the purpose of the Blameless Retrospective is to make space for real-time improvements, so be sure to hold them often and early enough to make space for those changes to occur on-set. It's too late to wait until production has wrapped because you won't be able to implement any actionable commitments then.

It's also important to leave enough time between Blameless Retrospectives to allow for people to follow through on the actionable commitments. The follow through builds trust in the process and encourages more participation, so holding time for a meeting every day is likely too often for people to be able to see changes taking shape, leading to distrust in the process or repetition of the same concerns before they can be addressed.





## Pitfalls to avoid

Like any team conversation, a Blameless Retrospective comes with certain risks. Here are some of the most common pitfalls and how to avoid them.

| Pitfall   | How to avoid or minimize   |
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| Some team members overtly blame others                | The facilitator should redirect the conversation, remind participants of the purpose and process.  |
| Some team members subtly blame others                 | Same as above.   |
| People don't follow through on actionable commitments | <p>This can quickly erode any trust in the process. Start every Blameless Retrospective with a review of and update on the commitments made at the last meeting, so that people are aware they will be held accountable to the commitments they have made.</p> <p>You can also identify someone on set to keep track of all actionable commitments and to share them with the full production team. Awareness creates a shared responsibility.</p> |
| People are afraid to speak up                         | The facilitator can prime conversations with a few probing questions (see Running a Blameless Retrospective above). Start small and recognises changes that are made. The more trust people have in the process to affect change, the more likely they are to speak up.  |
| A few voices dominate the conversation                | It will be up to the facilitator to be sure everyone has a chance to speak and the Blameless Retrospective does not become one person's venting ground. Consider group speaking tools like circle processes or a speaking order to make space for everyone.  |

| Pitfall                          | How to avoid or minimize   |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Some concerns get overlooked     | <p>Every issue raised should have an assigned actionable commitment at the end of a Blameless Retrospective meeting, unless it is determined to be out of scope i.e. an individual performance issue. The commitment might be direct or indirect, but a commitment should be made.</p> <p>Example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct commitment - We will change the way we do Process X. We will now do Process Y.</li> <li>• Indirect commitment - We will take Solution Z forward for approval.</li> </ul> <p>Subsequently, actions showing how that commitment was implemented should be shared at the next Blameless Retrospective.</p> |
| The conversation veers off topic | <p>Again, the facilitator is there to be sure the meeting is inclusive, efficient, solutions-focused, and on topic. If conversation veers, the facilitator should ask participants to park their discussion for another time, so the Blameless Retrospective can continue.</p>   |

These are a few of the ways your Blameless Retrospective might go off track. Other issues might arise as you move through a meeting. Be sure to have a strong facilitator in place to help navigate challenging conversations, maintain focus and intent, and foster safety for participants.

## Learn more

Blameless Retrospectives are commonly used in industries where work is done in sprints, like Information Technology and Marketing. The idea started with Norman Kerth's 2001 book [Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews](#) and was further refined and popularized by John Allspaw and his team at Etsy.

There are myriad videos and resources online if you search for Blameless Retrospectives. Keep in mind that most of those resources are designed for folks who work in offices and boardrooms. This guide has been designed with a film set in mind, respecting that folks will be starting and ending their days at different times, that different aspects of the production will involve different teams, and that time is the most valuable resource on set. When exploring other resources, remember to think about what you might need to do to adapt the process to your production.

