Evolving WordPress.com Design Team Rituals

Just enough process

Facilitate, not dictate

Culture and purpose win

Automattic, 2018-2019

Role: I led, organized, & produced all programs within this initiative.

Addressing some growing pains after a design reorg.

Some Friction Points

Not enough time to iterate after critique before an org wide visual status meeting.

Our updates had updates.

Designer’s calendars had become overloaded with meetings.

Design and Product Leaders didn’t have a clear picture of project status and issues.

Team of 18 designers was spread out across 12+ hour timezones

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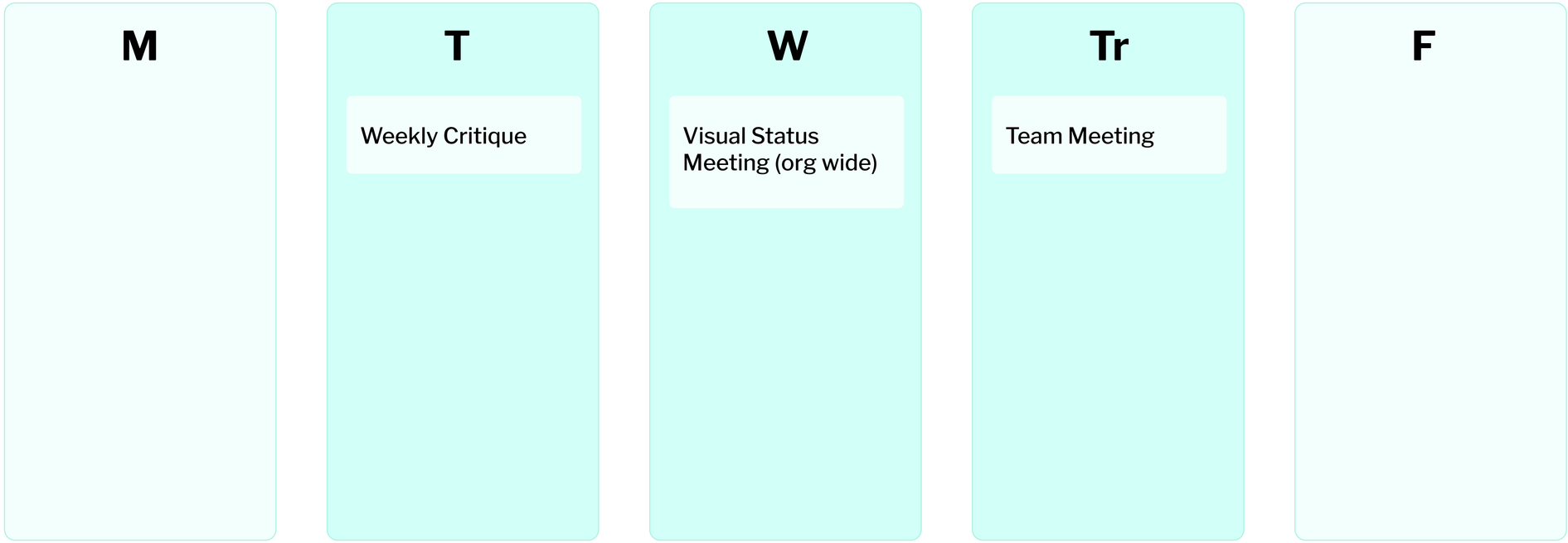
Recognizing the system and pivoting.

I set out initially to adjust our weekly critique schedule. However, I pivoted after recognizing that the issues were systemic.



Redesigning our weekly cadences.

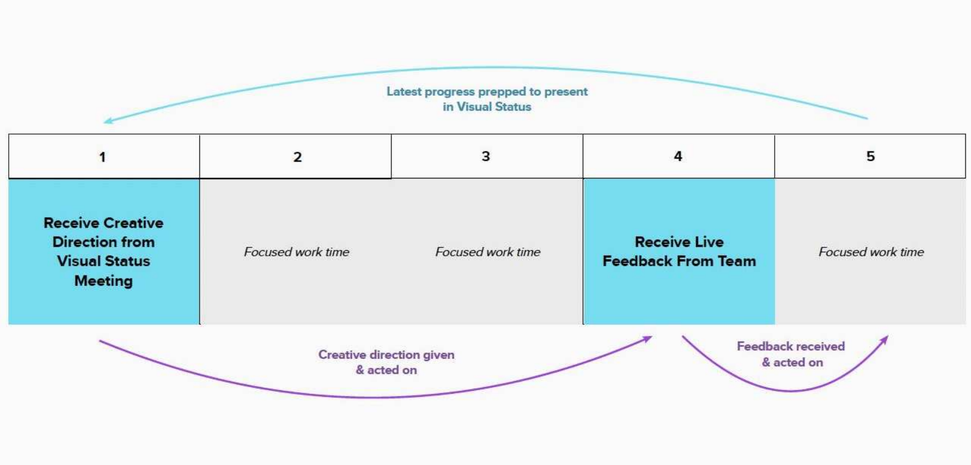
Seeing our friction points as part of a (broken) system, I chose to focus on 3 main cadences:

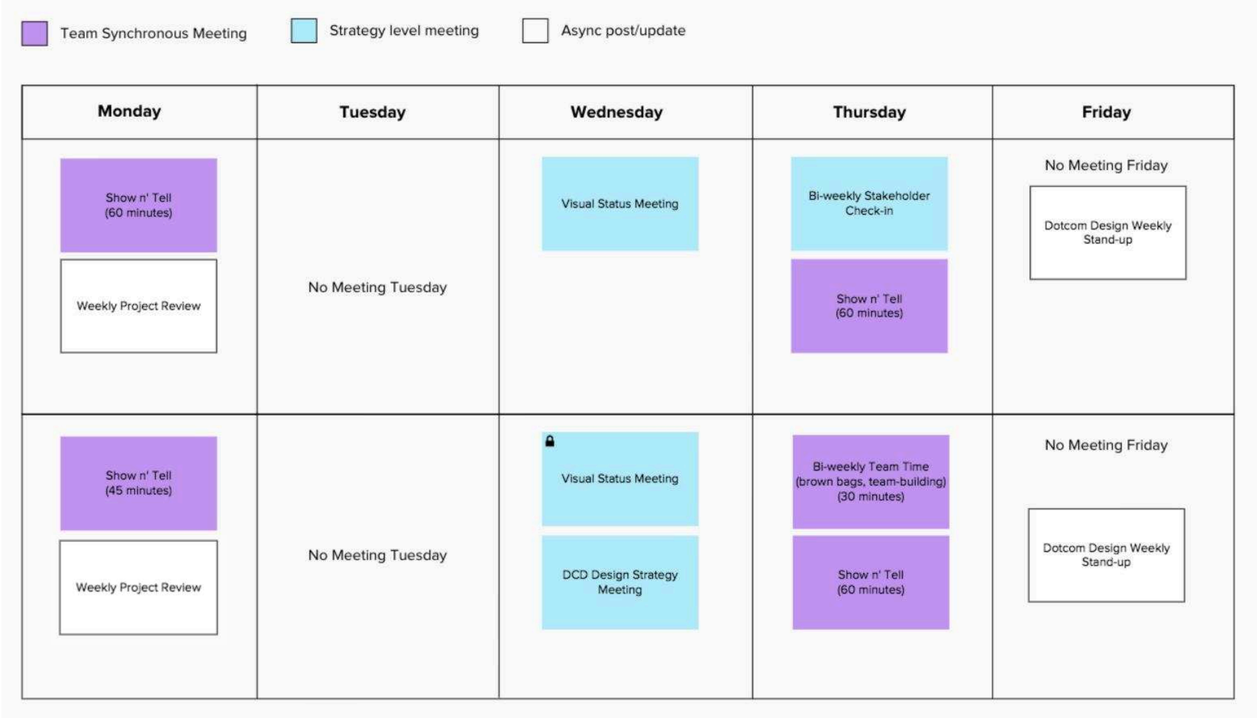
Feedback	Meeting	Update

Who was involved?

DRIVER	APPROVER	CONTRIBUTOR	INFORMED
DesignOps (me)	WP.com Head of Design	Design Directors Team Designers	Product Leads Engineering Leads

Mapping out our new cadences.





Screenshots from digital whiteboarding I did to explore and map out our cadences.
Show n' Tell is what we called our design critique.

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Defining our new rituals.

Feedback

2 weekly critiques at alternating times

Meeting

Eliminated previous team meeting

Added “Team Time” bi-weekly meeting focused on team building & learning

Introduced No Meeting Days

Update

Defined purposes of meetings, eliminating need for live updates

Introduced asynchronous weekly stand-up meeting

Added weekly project review for design leadership team

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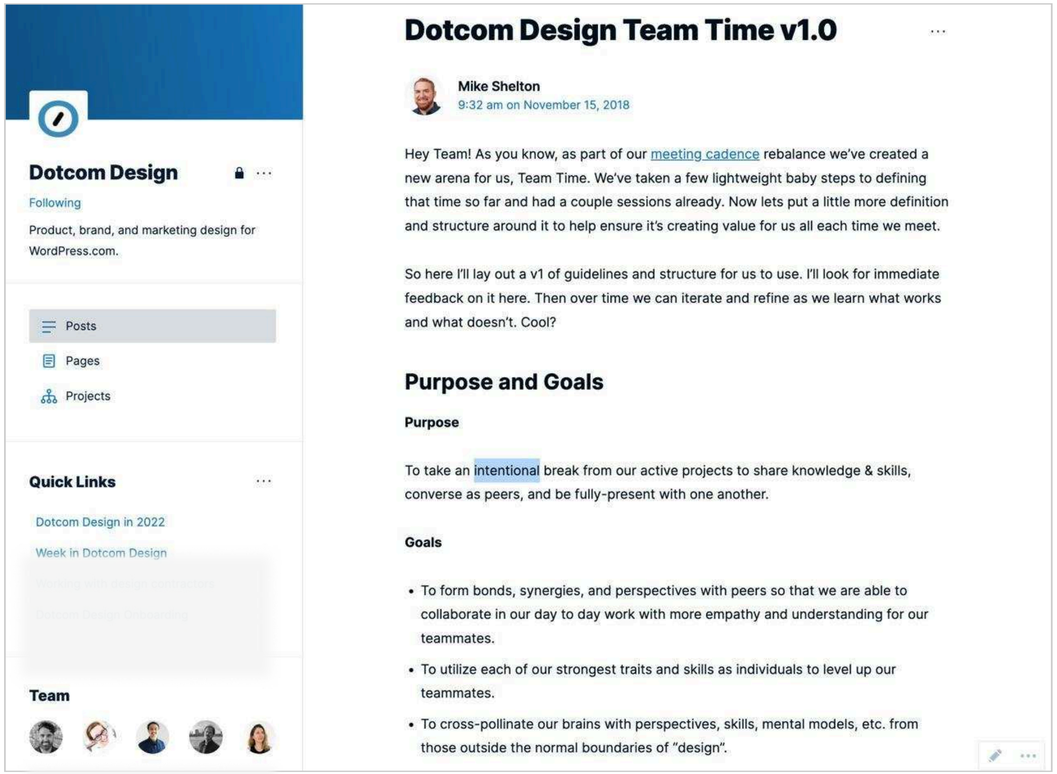
We introduced “Team Time” as a dedicated time to talk about anything but our projects.



Screenshots from “P2” (internal blogging system) post I wrote to introduce and document the new ritual.

How might we use the time?

We used our first team time session to think about what we want use this time for and what we don’t. This is not a comprehensive list.

Content and Topic Types

- “Lunch and learn” – someone presents on a topic or area of their expertise.
- Creative challenges & exercises – drawing, story-telling, logic puzzles, etc.
- Talks from guest speakers.
- Getting to know each other and how we each operate.
- Open discussion about topics that relate to our work (accessibility, inclusion, etc).
- Share an article to read, reflect, and discuss.
- Inspiration sharing – what inspires each us?
- Bring in stakeholders for discussion on certain topics.
- Just hang out at the “virtual” watercooler.
- Team building exercises/games – no trust falls though… unless we can figure out how to do a remote trust fall 🤔.

What to NOT use it for:

- Announcements.
- Project updates – this is a time out from our product work.
- Anything we can do better asynchronously (in P2/Slack/Freehand etc.).
- Anything that we’ve already got a meeting for.
- Working session.
- Something we (the whole team) needs to prepare for.
- Telling meaningless jokes or other random things to fill space.
- PUNS (this was controversial).
- Things that would normally be covered at a town hall.

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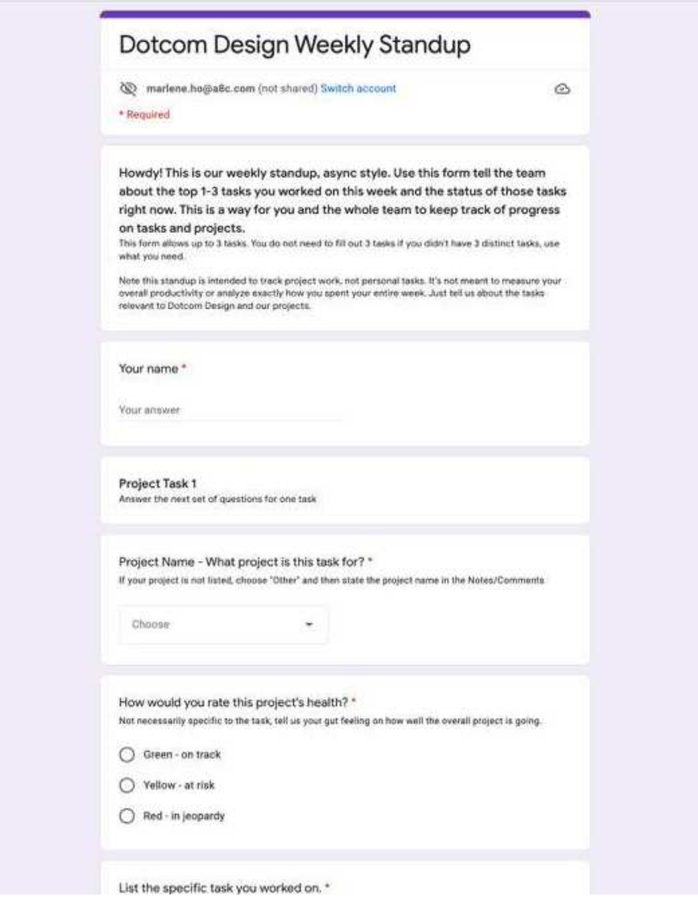
To reduce meeting time, we created an asynchronous stand-up “meeting” for updates.



Dotcom Design Weekly Standup

marlene.ho@a8c.com (not shared) Switch account

* Required

Howdy! This is our weekly standup, async style. Use this form tell the team about the top 1-3 tasks you worked on this week and the status of those tasks right now. This is a way for you and the whole team to keep track of progress on tasks and projects.

This form allows up to 3 tasks. You do not need to fill out 3 tasks if you didn't have 3 distinct tasks, use what you need.

Note this standup is intended to track project work, not personal tasks. It's not meant to measure your overall productivity or analyze exactly how you spent your entire week. Just tell us about the tasks relevant to Dotcom Design and our projects.

Your name *

Your answer

Project Task 1

Answer the next set of questions for one task

Project Name - What project is this task for? *

If your project is not listed, choose "Other" and then state the project name in the Notes/Comments

Choose

How would you rate this project's health? *

Not necessarily specific to the task, tell us your gut feeling on how well the overall project is going.

- Green - on track
- Yellow - at risk
- Red - in jeopardy

List the specific task you worked on. *

Each designer filled out this Google Form at the end of the week.

Designer	Project	Project Health	Task	Status
[redacted]	Alternate Home Page Templates	Green - on track	Worked through a few GitHub tickets related to the bugs we discovered in the Theme Variations last week. Shared some preliminary About designs with [redacted].	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]	OneTheme	Green - on track	I worked out a PR that should help [redacted] figure out a clearer structure for styles in the One Theme.	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		Completed the 1hr Team Time session with [redacted]. We spent the majority of the time review the GH project and seeing what issue we might be able to investigate.	
[redacted]	Page Editor Plus	Green - on track	Competitor research	100% - Completed
[redacted]	Page Editor Plus	Green - on track	Research and planning	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]	Private by Default	Red - in jeopardy	Trying to unblock the Jetpack piece	Blocked
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		Remove the maximum scale limitation	
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		Don't validate the signup form on change	
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		Also merged a few other fixes: [redacted]	
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows (the focus)	Green - on track	[redacted]	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]	Color Schemes	Green - on track	Got feedback during Show & Tell, started working on a PR for a new color scheme	0-25% - Getting started
[redacted]	Domains Improvements	Yellow - at risk	UX review	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]	Domains Improvements	Green - on track	Domain search usability study	0-25% - Getting started
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		G Suite padding/layout fixes with @[redacted]	
[redacted]	OneTheme	Green - on track	Working on a new (file) structure for the One Theme	75-99% - Wrapping up
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		Billing: Move upcoming charges to a separate tab	
[redacted]	Alternate Home Page Templates	Yellow - at risk	Work with [redacted] on default content	75-99% - Wrapping up
[redacted]	Alternate Home Page Templates	Yellow - at risk	Adjusting milestones according to scope changes	100% - Completed
[redacted]	Other	Green - on track	Meet [redacted] to sync with Navigator work so that page templates we''ll offer will make sense with Navigator	100% - Completed
[redacted]	Fixing the Flows		"Remove" text button action is unclear	
[redacted]	Alternate Home Page Templates	Green - on track	Worked on a 3rd iteration of the Content Slider block, including a Slide Manager panel	25-75% - Progressing
[redacted]			Premium Blocks revenue model investigation	

On Monday I would populate the this spreadsheet from the survey responses, which were fed in automatically.

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Crowdsourcing improvements for our Show n’ Tell.

We ran a team Retrospective focused on feedback and critique during a team meetup (offsite). I then set up a working group focused on critique to workshop potential improvements.

Critique wasn’t timezone inclusive

Rotation of facilitators led to inconsistentenc-ies in format and quality of critique

Share outs sometimes went too long, shortening the time for others to share

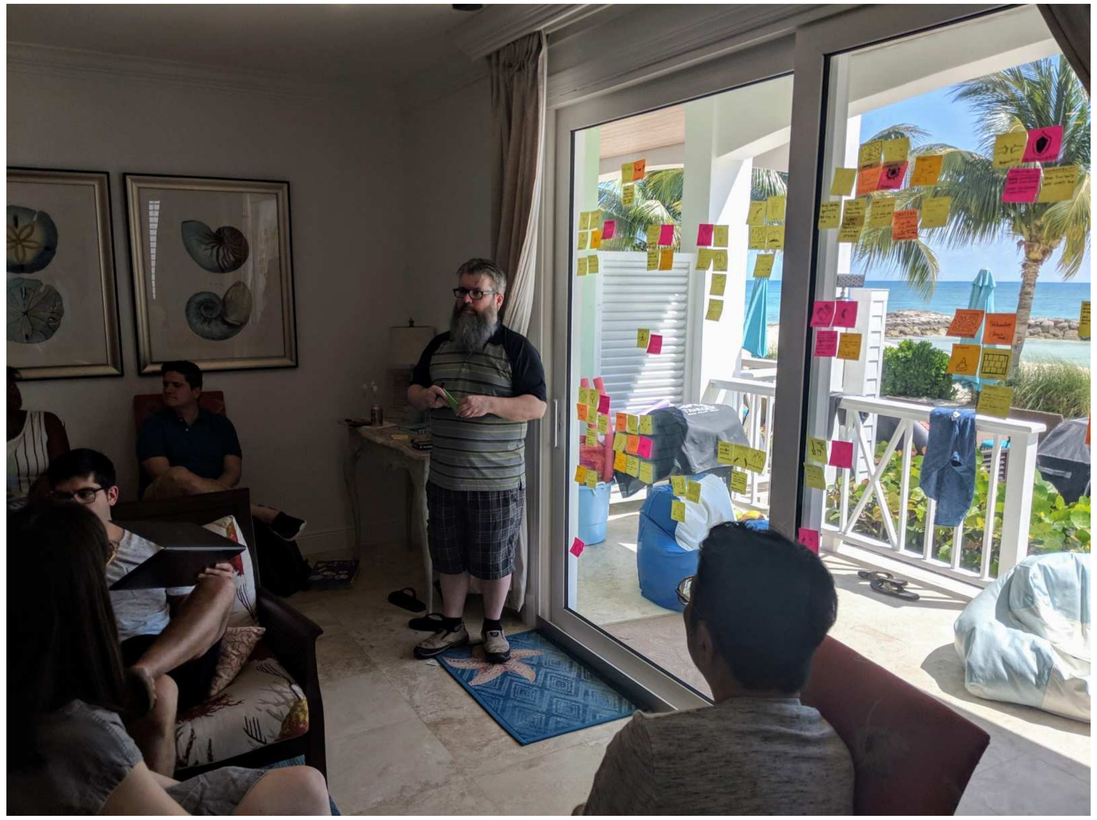

Photo from retrospective during a WordPress.com Team Meetup in the Bahamas.

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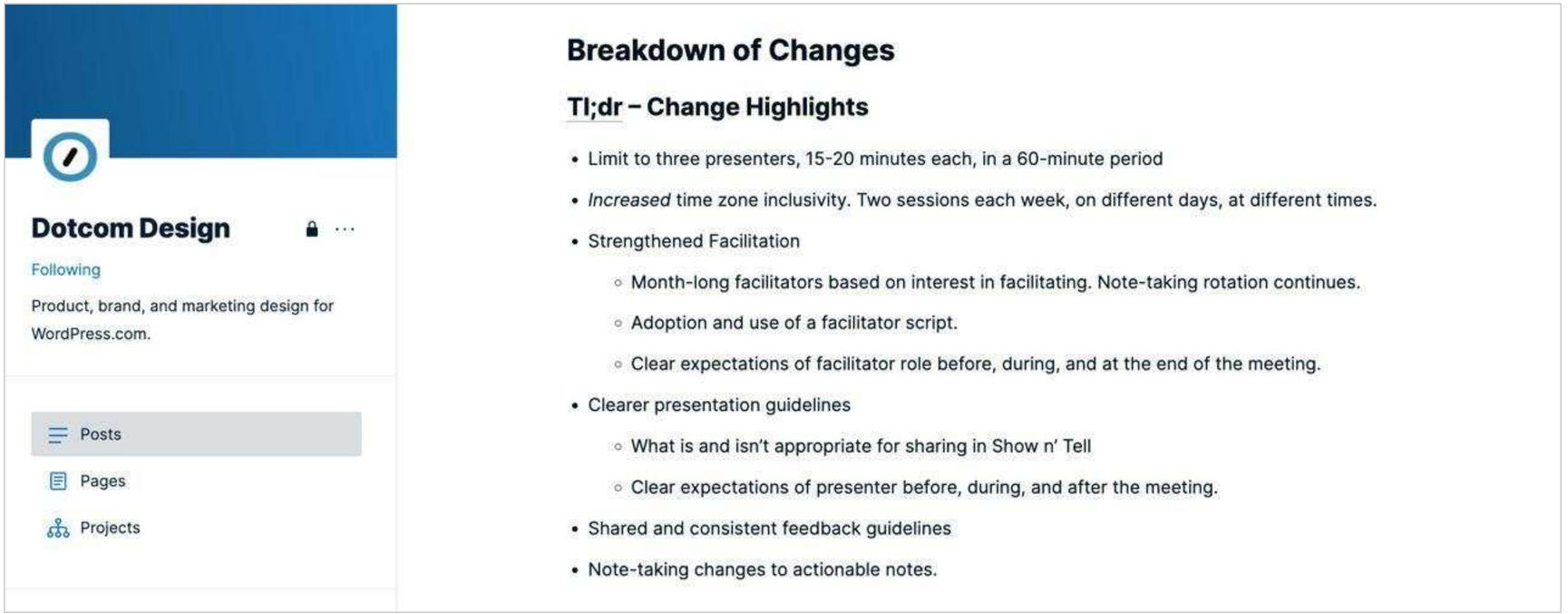
I took the working group’s proposal and helped execute on it.



Screenshot from “P2” (internal blogging system) post I wrote to introduce and document the changes.

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Meaningful Outcomes

- The asynchronous stand-up officially replaced over 50% of updates happening in other channels.
- The adjustment in cadences created a boost in team morale, with most designers reporting having 20%+ more time to design (measured by team health survey).
- Team Time initially was valuable but attendance waned overtime. Some Designers found it a valuable connection point, while others felt like it was a forced ritual.

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