

Scaling and Unifying Design Leadership

Focus on the multipliers

Just enough process

Automattic, 2020

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

In 2020, design leadership across Automattic was an immature and disconnected function. Cracks were beginning to show. We needed to unify and strengthen our leaders.

Who was involved?

DRIVER

DesignOps (me)

APPROVER

Automattic Design Council
Head of DesignOps

CONTRIBUTOR

Design Directors
Human Resources

INFORMED

Design Directors
Product Designers

Discovery

I met with our design leaders, our designers, and our Design Council (Senior Leadership) to understand the challenges. We learned the gap manifested itself in two ways:

1) Lack of experience

Some of our Design Directors had little management experience prior to their role.

A common challenge for design directors was how to deal with performance issues.

2) Lack of consistency

We had 14 Design Directors across 9 design teams but little documentation or standardization.

Different standards and levels of quality existed across our leadership team with nothing to ground them.

It was common and expected that designers would occasionally switch teams. When they did, they had adjust to completely different standards.

We chose to focus on the issue of consistency for this effort. There was a company wide leadership training program that we leaned on to help address the issue of lack of experience.

What We Did

To address the inconsistency, I attacked it from two levels:

1. At a systems level

Understanding how the inconsistency originated: We valued autonomy among how teams ran themselves but didn't have any values system to ground the decisions Design Directors were making. To address we created what became our Design Director Expectations.

2. Directly

I collected processes, documents, rituals, and helpful links from across our 9 design teams and their design directors. I collated them into what became our Design Director Handbook.

Deliverable

Design Director Expectations

Working with our Design Council (who oversaw all Design Directors) we created a foundational level artifact we called Design Director Expectations. It defined the core values and principles we as a Design Organization believed were important for design leaders to embody.

How We Lead Design

The role of Design Director at Automattic has 3 essential functions: Overseeing Design, Guiding and Mentoring, and Owning Projects. These functions frame the expectations for ourselves, providing a baseline for how we lead.

Overseeing Design

Design within the team and product is our responsibility. We uphold the highest standards for the team because we know that any low-quality design work hinders our mission to keep the web open and free. We create a culture of critique so that every member of the team feels both obligated and empowered to ask for and give critique. We inspire and lead by example which sometimes means getting involved directly.

Guiding and Mentoring

We invest in the success of individuals *and* the team. We elevate each designer to their highest potential. We build on individual growth by ensuring the team is more than the sum of its parts. We optimize for skill compatibility to enable the team to work across the experience, building a holistic experience, not individual features.

Owning Projects

We lead through uncertainty and change because keeping the web open and free is not easy but necessary. We clear obstacles that prevent great work, redirecting the team from anything non-essential.

Overseeing Design

We uphold the highest standards.

- Praise work that serves as an example of the bar we set. Use public channels such as P2, Slack, and Kudos to demonstrate what good looks like to the team.
- Encourage big, bold design that challenges the status quo. Challenge “this is how we’ve always done it.”
- Uphold efficiency and quality as key tenants to success. Ensure we’re executing quickly, at the highest level.
- Give critical feedback when you have it. Withholding it prevents growth for the product and the designer no matter how empathetic your intentions may be.
- Keep the focus on our **users**, and **outcomes** that provide **value** to them. We don’t design for design’s sake, we design for impact. A design that is not shipped has no impact.

We create a culture of critique.

- Create a safe environment, where people feel heard. Celebrate when critical feedback is given.
- Praise alongside critique. Positive, warranted feedback is equally as valuable as a way to build trust, and confirm decisions. It’s also necessary for critical feedback to be fully received.
- Set the bar for critique, leading by example. The team will follow your lead.
- Encourage feedback from others, and give feedback on feedback. Coach the team to be great at feedback themselves.
- Know your voice holds more weight. Frame your feedback appropriately.
- Drive with questions, not requests. Guide more than you prescribe. Clarify goals. Give designers trust and freedom to solve for themselves.
- More on Design Critique.

“Be a yardstick of quality. Some people aren’t used to an environment where excellence is expected.”
— Steve Jobs

Guiding and Mentoring

We invest in the success of individuals *and* the team.

Individuals

- Coach — commit time to providing each designer with guidance, challenges, and support towards their goals.
 - Try the GROW model, recommended in the Automattic Leadership Reboot program.
- Give your team a clear path to progress in their careers. Follow the Automattic Professional Development guide.
- Approach each designer’s growth and performance in a way that’s unique to the individual.

The Team

- Build on individual growth by ensuring the team is more than the sum of its parts.
- Optimize for skill compatibility to enable the team to work across the experience, building a holistic experience, not individual features.
- Know the strengths and weaknesses of each designer. Assign them work that is compatible yet challenges them.
- Improve the team by understanding strengths and weaknesses of a team *in relation to the work*. Put people with complementary skills together as needed.

Owning Projects

We clear obstacles that prevent great work.

- Set clear **goals** and make sure everyone understands the **why** behind them. This clarity will prevent obstacles later.
- Filter the noise for your team. P2 and Slack communication can become a major distraction. Help them focus on the essential information, while keeping a wider view to help the team to connect the dots across Automattic.
- Keep process lean and lightweight. Ensure the process fits the task. Be critical of any process or plan that doesn’t yield a tangible outcome for our customers and team. Review processes periodically, checking their effectiveness.
- Keep the team aligned, and escalate alignment issues at first sight. Manage stakeholders to gain support and clear concerns early. Take decisions transparently to move things forward.

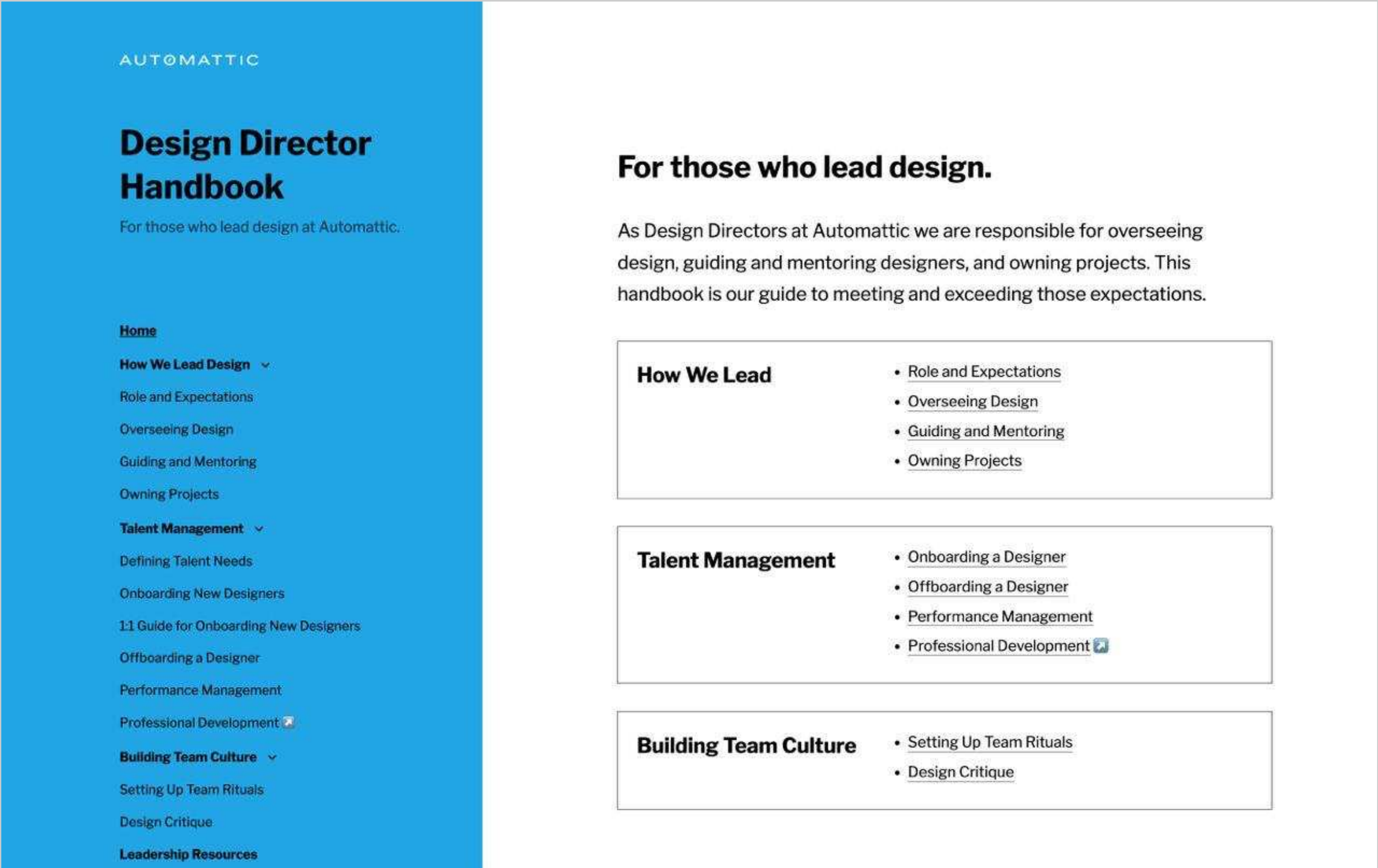
We champion resiliency.

- Expect to lead through uncertainty and change.
- Be a japanese umbrella: shield your team from events outside, but be transparent to keep your team aware.
- Have strong opinions and a low ego. Be clear and direct in your ideas, plans, and opinions and explain the reasoning clearly. Be also ready to be proved wrong and change course.
- Know when to experiment and when to focus on stability. There’s a right time for each.
- Own decisions, they are your responsibility. Listen and be open to being wrong but hold yourself accountable.

Deliverable

Design Director Handbook

I partnered with our Design Council and our Design Directors to create a Design Director Handbook which became the single source of truth for design leadership at Automattic.



Design Director Handbook

For those who lead design at Automattic.

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1:1 Guide for Onboarding New Designers

During a designer’s first 3 months, it’s recommended to hold a 1:1 every week. After that, adjust to a schedule that feels comfortable for both of you. [More on 1:1s at Automattic.](#)

Below is some guidance and ideas of topics to discuss at different points during a designer’s first year. This guidance assumes no major performance issues have popped up. If there are, focus your efforts on addressing those issues first. [More on Performance Management.](#)

Month 1

Weeks 1-2

The first two weeks should be reserved for focusing on support. You can set-up a brief introduction call to welcome them if preferred. If you do, keep the conversation focused on them, getting set-up, and their support rotation. During their first two weeks clarify expectations about attending any team functions or meetings. Generally, they should focus exclusively on support, but use your discretion.

Week 3 *(first week after support)*

There is a lot of essential knowledge sharing this week as well as getting them started on their first project. You will be talking with and directing them multiple times during this critical period. However, be sure to also reserve time to connect directly with them. Give them space to be able to share with you.

- Try to understand how they prefer to work, and share how you do as well. If you want some inspiration, you can [consider these questions.](#)
- Debrief their support rotation with them.

Meaningful Outcomes

- On our bi-annual Team Health Survey, Designers reported a **15%+ increase in “how well do you feel supported by your design director”**.
- The Design Director Expectations enabled more productive conversations between our Design Council and Design Directors about their performance as leaders and how they were leading their teams.
- The Design Director Handbook became a consistent repository for Design Leaders to both reference but also to contribute to.