



Success with Distributed Agile Ceremonies in Sococo

Practical tips that can help your team get the most out of the Big Three Agile ceremonies: Standup, Planning and Retrospective

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Continuous improvement is hard. It requires leadership, dedication and follow through, all of which are trickier on distributed teams. The good news is that ways to examine work and improve upon it are built right into Agile AND Sococo! We've pulled together some practical tips that can help your team get the most out of the Big Three Agile ceremonies: Standup, Planning and Retrospective.

STANDUP



PLANNING



RETROSPECTIVES



Welcome to Our Distributed Agile World!

Thanks for checking out this eBook, fellow Sococo Agilists!

As distributed team leaders, we all know that trying to keep employees engaged is tricky. The beauty of embracing Agility is that there are ceremonies built into these frameworks that lend themselves perfectly to strengthening performance by ensuring teams are empowered to self organize. We designed Sococo specifically to facilitate this level of collaboration on distributed teams so that Agility is not tethered to a physical co-location.

The Standup, Planning, and Retrospective ceremonies are built around the principle of continuous improvement, the core of our Agile values. They are a foundational part of success on distributed Agile teams. Paying particular attention to their efficiency makes the difference between a strong performing team and a team that struggles to self organize, improve, and work better together.

At Sococo, having teams come together under our digital roof for all of these ceremonies is what gives us purpose. We've spent countless hours listening to our customers and working with them to come up with creative ways to set them up for success in their online offices. These tips are the fruit of this close collaboration.

Enjoy, and see you in Sococo!



Mandy Ross

Director of Community / Agile Coach
Sococo



Throughout this book, you'll see bonus "mini-tips" contributed by our friends at SolutionsIQ, the largest pure-play Agile consultancy with offices on both US coasts and in India.

In addition to being a top Agile training company across the globe, they are also long-time Sococo users. Their experience as a fully distributed team of Agile coaches and experts has been a tremendous source of learning for us at Sococo as their partner.

These extra tips are a taste of what make up the "secret sauce" of SolutionsIQ's terrific success in the global Agile coaching community.

Extra special thanks to Leslie Morse and Ryan Keawekane for contributing their expertise and time to this book!



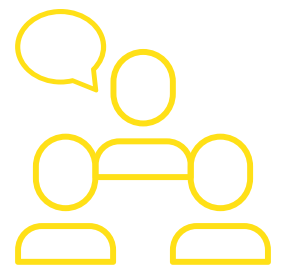
Distributed Agile STANDUP

STANDUP IS:

A daily “inspect and adapt” activity to determine whether is the team on track, and if not, what needs to be done to get back on track. This is a team discussion, not a status report to a manager, and is usually in the form of a short, 15 minute timeboxed meeting that is held in the same time and the same place daily. A good way to start conducting standups is for each person to answer these three questions:

- What did I do yesterday?
- What am I working on today?
- What are my impediments?

Regardless of the technique used, it is critical to keep the session short and focused – any discussion needed must happen after this session in the form of small breakouts with subsets of the team.



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Designate a Team Room

Meet in the same room every day at the same time for your standup, and name the room to reflect its special role. Keeping standup in a consistent location helps the team form good habits and be punctual. When you establish a specific room in your Sococo space, it becomes a natural place for people to pop in at the same time every day. When people notice their entire team popping into the same room at once, it's an intuitive visual and contextual reminder that it's time for standup, which keeps everything on time and focused on sharing information rather than gathering stragglers.

Use the Table for Grounding

Use the table in your Sococo Team Room to ground a cadence for your team during standup – encourage them to go around the table and each person answer the three questions in order of avatar position. This helps the team self-organize better, rather than having the ScrumMaster guide the team. The ultimate goal of an online ScrumMaster is to say as little as possible during the standup and have the team self-organize around the day's activities.

Share Information for Better Focus

Share a screen with your sprint tracking board (such as Jira, or AgileCraft) during Standup rather than expecting each person to look at it locally. This way, everyone has a common understanding of each person's committed set of user stories and it provides more context to updates. You can also have others share screens with relevant information, such as the burndown chart and bug metrics, as Sococo allows each room participant to share their own unique screen without having to fumble around handing control back and forth between people.

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BONUS TIP 01

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Actually stand up, even in virtual meetings. It ensures that the meeting doesn't run long.



Determine Your Video Etiquette

Create an etiquette around using video during standup, that best suits your team's personality and culture. We recommend either all on, or all off – Sococo is about leveling the playing field, and believe it or not, standup can be a little weird if some people choose to use video and others don't. Other teams choose a middle ground and keep video off, except for the person delivering the update. Experiment with different formats until you find one you like – the important thing is to decide as a team how to operate with video.

Visually Ensure Breakouts Happen

Typically in Standup, impediments will be called out by team members in order to get help with resolution. Ideally, the team will self organize around breakout sessions in order to resolve what has come up. On distributed Agile teams, the ScrumMaster has to do quite a bit of tracking to ensure that people are following through together in these breakouts. In Sococo you can see in real time on the map what breakouts are taking place and who's involved, so the ScrumMaster is more informed on team activities and can ask the right questions – what the result of the breakout was, instead of whether the breakout happened.

Embrace the Backchannel

Encourage the team to use the room chat backchannel during standup. It might seem like it's a distraction to have chatter going on in text at the same time, but it's actually a useful activity. We have observed that the majority of this chatter involves working details out in parallel, so that individual updates are more informed, and the day kicks off with just that much extra coordination and collaboration. It's also good to see a little fun and silly banter in the backchannel – teams that are comfortable having fun will make progress easier.

BONUS TIP 02

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Draw pictures
(either virtual or on actual paper) and share it on camera or with share-screen when needed.
Some people are visual learners.





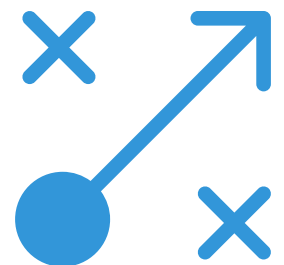
Distributed Agile PLANNING

PLANNING IS:

A session at the beginning of a new sprint during which the Product Owner presents a backlog of prioritized work in the form of user stories to the team. The team evaluates, discusses, and estimates the user stories using relative sizing. Based on velocity and informed discussion:

- The team selects the work they think they can accomplish.
- Sets a sprint goal.
- Creates a sprint backlog.

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More Screen Shares, More Transparency

Encourage team members to share screens as the team reviews the backlog and analyzes user stories. While the backlog is the single place for all a team's work, everyone has their own design ideas and notes that influence the way they think about the sprint commitment. When everyone can share screens at the same time, it creates an even richer and more transparent collaboration culture. The more people share their ideas and research, the higher level of confidence the team can have in their shaping of user stories.

User Breakouts to Support Flow

It's pretty common during a planning session to hit an area that needs a bit of drill down before the user story can be complete. This might be doing a code review, a quick block diagram design, but usually doesn't require the entire team to be involved. Breakout rooms can be used to accommodate these quick discussions between a few people while not disrupting the flow of the main planning session with the rest of the team. Once done, they can pop back in and contribute their findings.

Experiment with Sizing Practices

Sizing user stories as part of the planning ceremony can be clunky and awkward when teams are distributed. Experiment to find ways that keep it fun and interesting by using different parts of Sococo to vote on your size: the chat window, shared screens and even physical flash cards on camera. Changing it up keeps the team engaged and prevents them from getting into an estimation rut. One way to really break up the monotony of estimation exercises is to select a set of rooms on your Sococo map to be the sizing rooms. Rename the rooms to your sizing scale (Fibonacci, T-shirt sizes, etc.) and when voting on a user story size, have the team pop to the room corresponding to their vote. It's a little wacky, but you'd be surprised at how engaged people become.

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BONUS TIP 03

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Backlog Refinement:

It isn't enough to confirm shared understanding of the story and how to accomplish delivery. Use this prompt to help improve the secret sauce of an outstanding Backlog Refinement session, "We will prove we've met the acceptance criteria of this story by demoing..."

Defend the Definition of Done

Make sure the team takes the time to establish the Definition of Done for user stories before they start sizing. Also, write it down in a document and keep it highly visible – front and center on a shared screen for the duration of the session. Planning can be exhausting, and it's easy to let things slide when you're getting to the end of the day so having that visible reminder is really useful. It's up to the team to keep each other honest, and to remind each other to think about all the things that might make the user story done: writing and performing tests, input from stakeholders, assets needed from the creative team, localized translations, etc. Encourage the team to share these artifacts as well on their own screens. This is another situation in which teams can richly share information on multiple screens simultaneously and get a lot more out of the meeting.

Zoom to the Room for Focus

Planning sessions can be long, and depending on how complex your software is, can involve much debate over design and implementation decisions. To keep the team engaged, encourage them to “zoom to the room” rather than viewing the entire map during the session. When they observe other activities going on in the space, it is easy to get distracted. By focusing on just the room participants, teams can better focus on the important decisions being made in the Planning session.

BONUS TIP 04

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Sprint Planning:

Know your capacity walking into the session. It's easy to overcommit during sprint planning. Be sure to have reviewed your personal calendar to know how much time you can truly dedicate to the team for accomplish the sprint goal.



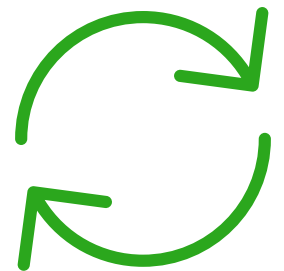
Distributed Agile RETROSPECTIVES

RETROSPECTIVE IS:

A meeting for the team to discuss the a set of work that has just completed within a specific time period, and determines what changes could be made in order to improve the next sprint. There are many styles of retrospective, but the basic objective is to understand:

- What went well?
- What were our challenges?
- What can we do differently or do more of to improve?

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Level the Playing Field

No team is made up of purely extroverts or purely introverts. Extroverts more easily dominate conversations in virtual space, and introverts more easily exclude themselves. Even the playing field in your retrospectives by reaching out to the quieter people via private chat in the backchannel to privately ask them if they want to contribute. Making the extroverts aware of this helps them to look for and call out that input without making the introverts uncomfortable. Some people might feel more comfortable delivering their thoughts through the meeting leader, which can then moderate a broader discussion to allow the less verbal folks to get their two cents in without having to uncomfortably compete for air time.

Observe Engagement and Take Action

When teams are distributed, engagement can be difficult to gauge. In Sococo, the retrospective leader can observe engagement in real time by keeping an eye on everyone's avatars during the retrospective. These agreements will result in observable team member behavior patterns during your sessions. Are people using mostly text chat instead of verbally participating? Who are the people you have to call on to get them to talk? Are certain people hogging all the air time due to awkward silence? Use retrospective behavior patterns in Sococo to measure how the team is working together.

Retrospectives Are Better Among Friends

When team interactions only occur in ceremonies or other meetings, and stick strictly to the business at hand, it's doubtful that the individuals on the team feel a sense of connection or closeness to each other. Outside the ceremonies, Sococo allows a broader view of what's going on, and can create social hangout places on the map for people to get to know each other, such a lounge or coffee room – we even have an actual watercooler area on most maps! Encourage “random” interactions with others to talk about your day, share stories, gab about your favorite tv show, and all the other random little things we as humans enjoy sharing with each other. When your team is more socially connected, retrospectives are more effective based on the increased trust and empathy a Sococo environment provides.

BONUS TIP 05

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Encourage “random” interactions with others to talk about your day, share stories, gab about your favorite tv show, and all the other random little things we as humans enjoy...

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Right Tool for the Right Job

No two teams are the same, and thus no two teams will use the same set of tools for their retrospectives. The best ScrumMasters will be on top of the challenges the team faces, will know the toolset teams like to use for this ceremony, and will actively ensure it continues to meet the team needs. In Sococo, different tools can be shared on multiple screens, so you're never limited to operating in a single tool when you may need to draw information from several sources to facilitate a robust discussion.

Manage Awkward Silence

Retrospectives can take a lot out of an Agile team. Being spontaneously honest and articulate at the same time is difficult, especially for introverts, and this can make the retrospective the most emotionally draining ceremony in Agile. A common effect of this, particularly prevalent on distributed teams, is the awkward silence – that moment when the Sococo room echoes with total silence, followed by a slightly painful joke about how nobody is contributing, followed by more silence. Uncomfortable, and just all too common on distributed software teams. The retrospective leader must ensure that said awkward silence is time-boxed – a little silence is OK, and over time the team will become accustomed to these pauses.



BONUS TIP 06

Ceremony tips for distributed teams from the coaches at SolutionsIQ

Even the playing field in your retrospectives by reaching out to the quieter people via private chat in the backchannel to privately ask them if they want to contribute to the conversation.

Sococo Ceremony Success Checklist

- ☐ **Designate a Team Room** with your team name, and use it for all your ceremonies to create a home base.
- ☐ **Create working agreements** for how the team will use video, voice, and text chat during each ceremony - you might agree to use each service in different ways for each of the various ceremonies.
- ☐ **Use avatar positions** around the table in your Project Room to help the team self-organize in roundtable discussions.
- ☐ **Encourage screen sharing** to have richer, more productive discussions. (Remember that each team member can share a screen at the same time as the others.)
- ☐ **Use room chat or P2P chat** as a backchannel for information sharing and getting questions answered without interrupting the primary discussion.
- ☐ **Observe behavior patterns** using the rich context in the Sococo space to measure team engagement.
- ☐ **Encourage social activity** outside of ceremonies to build empathy and trust on the team.





WHAT'S NEXT? TO LEARN MORE...

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