



# “Hidden Curriculum”: Assessing Institutional Messages about Power

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This piece is a guide to help the reader examine how their institution, organization, or community might be conveying messages about power and belonging without intending to do so. It introduces the concept of a “hidden curriculum”, and shows how the application of this concept can help individuals and leadership teams bring their communities into alignment with core Jewish values like kedusha (holiness), kavod (respect), and tzedek (justice).

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An organization's “**hidden curriculum**” is often different from its **explicit curriculum**. (I will use the term “curriculum” here for both specifically educational institutions and those that don't have, or don't exclusively have, an educational mission, to refer to the learnings and dispositions those institutions foster). The established, publicized policies and procedures that foster safe spaces and *kavod* (respect) are part of your organization's explicit curriculum. These written documents offer agreed-upon, shared values that are a crucial step to community change. When we intentionally talk and write about gender-based violence and harassment in our communities, divrei torah and sermons, adult learning sessions, and weekly newsletters on these topics, they are all a part of the explicit curriculum.

What often goes unexplored — as it is less identifiable and thus more of a challenge — is the hidden curriculum: the things we teach that are never written down, and may not even be taught consciously.

As opposed to the explicit curriculum, the hidden curriculum is not formalized; it will not be found in any overview, handout, or guide. It consists of the implicit values that we learn just by being participants in our communities. While the messages of the hidden curriculum are everywhere, they hover just outside of our peripheral vision until we turn a spotlight onto them.

A crucial though often overlooked step in organizational and communal changemaking is the examination of the hidden curriculum about power: Who has the most power in our communities, and why? How are decisions made and who controls these processes? Whose voices are most heard? Where are our gaps, and where can we improve? In exploring the hidden curriculum, we are able to consider the culture of our institutions, and what our norms convey about our values. Our hidden curricula convey nuanced messages to young people and adults alike. It is ideal when our explicit and hidden curricula align with one another and we offer consistent messaging and values.

The term “hidden curriculum” is potentially misleading. Its messages are actually in plain sight; what makes it “hidden” is that often these messages go unnamed — they are not spoken about or acknowledged. The questions below are suggested prompts for surfacing these messages so that they can be acknowledged and, where appropriate, changed. The hidden curriculum can be explored in many ways—for example, across a series of meetings, in sub-committees, in small-scale facilitated conversations, and/or through the solicitation of individual written answers.

## SUGGESTED PROMPTS TO SPARK EXAMINATION OF AN ORGANIZATION'S HIDDEN CURRICULUM AROUND POWER:

### 1. What messages do we convey at meetings and public programs about how diverse opinions will be heard?

- **For example:** Do we have a set of spoken and written norms or values for sharing opinions and beliefs in a respectful way?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**every gathering in an institution is an opportunity for modeling respectful dialogue.

### 2. What messages do we convey about what counts as strong leadership and expertise?

- **For example:** Is there diverse gender representation across the positions of leadership (both professional and lay leadership)?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**studies demonstrate that when adults (across genders) are asked to imagine “what does a leader look like?” they will likely picture a male. If we want to change conceptions about what constitutes leadership and expertise, we need to actively choose diverse representation.

### 3. What messages do we convey around who has power to make policies?

- **For example:** Are institutional policies made within committees? How are they shared and distributed? How is input solicited and welcomed? Is there a written policy on harassment and safe space that has not been widely publicized? If not, how could it be shared and formalized so that it becomes explicit?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**policies and guidelines (part of explicit curricula) set the tone for an organization and convey its values; however, policies that are developed by one person or a small group, or without input from a wide range of stakeholders, are often seen as “policing” or “intervention” rather than reflecting and advancing core values of safety, respect, and equity.

### 4. What messages do we convey about who has status in our institution?

- **For example:** As you look across the past ten years of honorees for celebrations (dinner dances, fundraisers, Simchat Torah honors, etc.) can you see a diverse range of family structures, socio-economic backgrounds, gender representation, etc.?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**honors such as these convey who we value and respect as contributors to our community.

### 5. What messages do we send via public programming about experts in the field?”

- **For example:** When we host panel discussions or guest speakers, do we consider whether we are including a diverse representation of voices? How often do we have all-male panels? How often do we include, for example, Jews of color?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**panels, speakers, and scholar-in-residence invitees implicitly convey our values around who has “expert power”--and who is worth listening to.

### 6. What messages do we send about the value of diverse professional roles in our institution?

- **For example:** What segment of the budget is allocated to compensation of the teachers; what segment is the early childhood education budget? Where do educational roles fall in the organizational structure?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**for example, elementary and early childhood education is often considered “women’s work”, and thus, lower status work; also, when that work is undervalued, women are disproportionately affected. The level of compensation we pay sends messages about and correlates with who and what is respected in a community, what constitutes valued and respected knowledge, and what we view as “wisdom” and “thought leadership”.

## 7. What messages do we send about our teens and leadership potential?

- **For example:** Do we routinely recruit cisgender males to lead discussions, give presentations, and run for youth group leadership positions?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**through these choices, adults express and teens learn whose leadership is valued.

## 8. What messages do we send about families and power?

- **For example:** Does programming (and wording for programming) reflect the wide range of household and family structures in our membership--for example, programs that value and appeal to those without children and/or partners?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**our programming – and our language for programming — is a common and powerful example of a hidden curriculum. An institution might state outwardly that it values all members, but if the majority of programming appeals, for example, to couples, parents of young children, and members under 60, many other people will receive the message they are less important and feel themselves to be less powerful.

## 9. What messages do we send around socio-economic status and power in our institutions?

- **For example:** What are the policies on membership dues, and how are they publicized? Is there a sliding scale? How is financial assistance handled? Likewise, how are new board members selected?
- **This connects to creating sacred spaces because...**power and status in Jewish institutions can often implicitly favor those of higher socio-economic status. Attention to values of inclusion across income levels will support a diversity in membership and lay leadership.

## Can you think of your own questions?

Asking these questions may be startling, or even uncomfortable, but as we talk about them, there is great potential for organizational self-awareness, growth, and change. Each exploration supports the process of revealing an organization's **hidden curriculum**, which in turn can lead to meaningful reflection on who is more powerful and who is more vulnerable, and how our institutions might disrupt these norms. It is only by navigating any discomfort that we can see what is not fully seen, talk about what is normally not talked about, and examine and change as appropriate what is often taken for granted as "the way things are".

*This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at [www.jewishsacredspaces.org](http://www.jewishsacredspaces.org).*