

Hidden Curriculum Debrief Template

“What just happened?”—A tool to decode workplace social dynamics after they’ve already happened.

What is the Hidden Curriculum?

The hidden curriculum is everything you’re supposed to know—but no one ever taught you.

It’s the unwritten rules. The social cues. The “obvious” expectations that aren’t obvious at all.

Examples:

- “Let me know if you have questions” actually means “figure it out yourself”
- “We’re flexible” actually means “you should be available $24/7$ ”
- “Great work!” from your manager might mean “this is perfect” or “this is fine but I’m being polite”

For neurodivergent people, the hidden curriculum is exhausting. You’re constantly guessing. Constantly second-guessing. Constantly wondering if you missed something.

This tool helps you debrief after a confusing interaction—so you can learn the pattern and protect yourself next time.

How to Use This

After a confusing or draining workplace interaction, work through the prompts below. You can write your answers down, or just think through them.

The goal isn't to "fix" yourself. It's to decode the pattern so you're less confused next time.

The Debrief Prompts

1. What happened?

Describe the interaction in neutral terms. Just the facts.

Example:

"My manager said 'great work' on my report, but then asked me to revise it."

2. What did I think it meant?

What was your initial interpretation?

Example:

"I thought 'great work' meant the report was done. So I was confused when they asked for revisions."

3. What did it actually mean?

Now that you have more information, what was the real message?

Example:

"'Great work' was just a social nicety. The real message was 'this needs revisions.'"

4. What was the hidden rule?

What's the unwritten expectation you were supposed to know?

Example:

“When someone says ‘great work’ but then gives feedback, they’re softening the criticism. The feedback is the real message.”

5. How did I feel during the interaction?

Notice your emotional response without judgment.

Example:

“I felt confused, then frustrated, then anxious that I’d done something wrong.”

6. What did I do?

How did you respond in the moment?

Example:

“I apologized and said I’d revise it. But I didn’t ask what needed to change because I didn’t want to seem difficult.”

7. What do I wish I’d done?

If you could go back, what would you do differently?

Example:

“I wish I’d asked: ‘What specifically needs to change?’ instead of guessing.”

8. What can I do next time?

What’s one thing you can try if this happens again?

Example:

“Next time someone says ‘great work’ but gives feedback, I’ll ask: ‘What’s working, and what needs to change?’”

Example Debrief: “Let me know if you have questions”

What happened?

My manager said “let me know if you have questions” after assigning a project. I had questions, so I asked. They seemed annoyed.

What did I think it meant?

I thought they wanted me to ask questions. That’s what they said.

What did it actually mean?

“Let me know if you have questions” was a social nicety. They expected me to figure it out on my own.

What was the hidden rule?

You’re supposed to try to solve it yourself first. Only ask questions if you’re truly stuck.

How did I feel?

Confused, then embarrassed, then frustrated that they didn’t just say what they meant.

What did I do?

I stopped asking questions. But then I made mistakes because I was guessing.

What do I wish I’d done?

I wish I’d asked: “Do you want me to try this on my own first, or check in with you before I start?”

What can I do next time?

Next time, I'll clarify expectations upfront: "Should I reach out if I have questions, or try to solve it first?"

Example Debrief: "We're flexible"

What happened?

During my interview, they said "we're flexible." I took that to mean I could set my own hours. But when I started, they expected me to be available 9-5.

What did I think it meant?

I thought "flexible" meant I could work when I'm most productive (which is not 9-5).

What did it actually mean?

"Flexible" meant "we don't micromanage your schedule, but you still need to be available during core hours."

What was the hidden rule?

"Flexible" doesn't mean "do whatever you want." It means "we expect you to figure out what's reasonable."

How did I feel?

Frustrated. Misled. Like I'd been set up to fail.

What did I do?

I adjusted my schedule to 9-5, but I resented it because I felt like they'd lied.

What do I wish I'd done?

I wish I'd asked: "What does 'flexible' mean in practice? Are there core hours I need to be available?"

What can I do next time?

Next time, I'll ask for specifics: "What are your expectations around availability and working hours?"

What to Do With This

After you've debriefed:

1. Notice the pattern

Is this the first time this has happened? Or is it a recurring dynamic?

2. Adjust your expectations

You're not wrong for taking people at their word. But now you know the hidden rule.

3. Ask for clarity next time

You're allowed to ask: "What does that mean in practice?" or "Can you be more specific?"

4. Protect yourself

If someone's communication style is consistently unclear, that's data. You can decide how much energy you want to invest in decoding them.

A Note on "Hidden Curriculum"

The hidden curriculum isn't your fault.

You're not "bad at social cues." You're not "too literal." You're not "difficult."

You're just operating in a system that expects you to know things no one ever taught you.

This tool doesn't fix the system. But it helps you decode it—so you're less confused, less anxious, and less likely to blame yourself.

When to Use This

- **After a confusing interaction** (“What just happened?”)
 - **After feedback that surprised you** (“I thought I was doing fine”)
 - **After a social misstep** (“I didn't know that was a problem”)
 - **When you're feeling anxious about work** (“Am I missing something?”)
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Quick Reference Card

After a confusing interaction:

1. What happened? (Just the facts)
 2. What did I think it meant?
 3. What did it actually mean?
 4. What was the hidden rule?
 5. How did I feel?
 6. What did I do?
 7. What do I wish I'd done?
 8. What can I do next time?
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This tool supports the ZONE Framework: noticing your state, understanding what's driving it, and choosing how to respond.

This tool is part of the ZONE Starter Vault.

For more workplace regulation tools, visit neuroadapt.ai