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Design Academy

Are you manipulating or influencing?

A practical guide to ethical Behavioural Design

Are you Manipulating or Influencing?

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Let me ask you something that might make you uncomfortable: *When you use Behavioural Design to change someone's mind or influence their behaviour, are you manipulating them or helping them?*

If you're like most professionals I meet, you probably paused at that question. Maybe you felt a little defensive. Good. That discomfort means you care about doing the right thing, and that's exactly why this guide exists.

The Question That Changes Everything

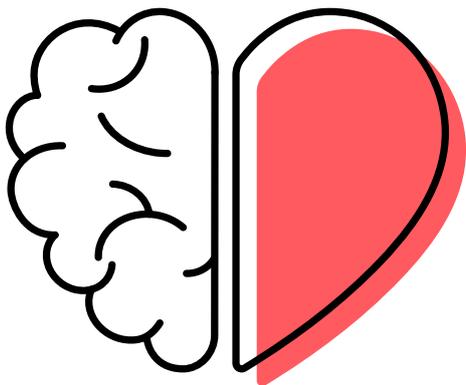
Here's the truth: You're already using Behavioural Design, whether you realise it or not. Every time you craft an email to get buy-in from your boss, design a user flow that guides customers, or structure a presentation to persuade stakeholders, you're shaping behaviour. You're applying behavioural psychology. And that's not a problem. It's essential. **Because the ability to influence isn't optional for professionals who want to get things done, it's fundamental.**

Yet somehow, influence still carries a bad reputation. People worry that using behavioural science makes them manipulative. But here's the uncomfortable truth: the same techniques are already being used:

- ...to make people scroll endlessly on social media,
- ...to exploit fears during election campaigns,
- ...to push vulnerable consumers into poor financial decisions.

So the question isn't: Should we use influence techniques?

The real question is: *Will we use them to serve people's best interests, or exploit them?*



So what makes the difference between you and them?

• **Intent.**

If your intention is to influence people to progress in their work, life, or environment **you're designing positive influence.**

If your intention is primarily to benefit yourself without regard for the person you're influencing **you're manipulating.**

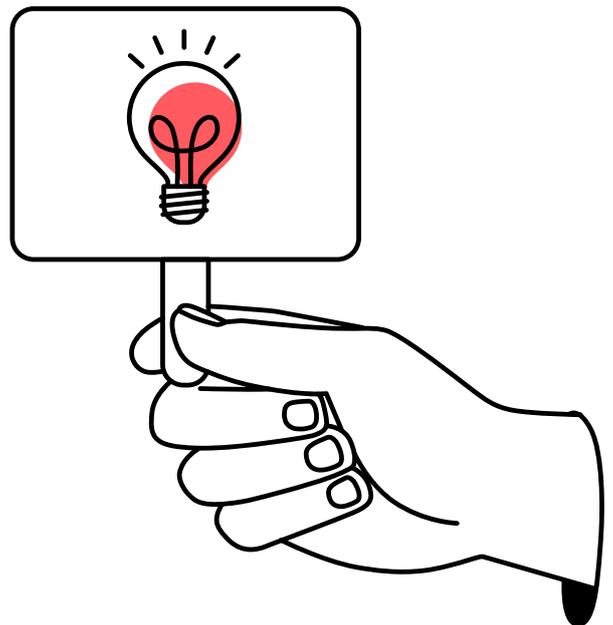
It sounds simple, but in practice, the line can get blurry. That's why I've spent years developing practical tools to help professionals like you stay on the right side of that line.

The Power is in Your Hands

Behavioural Design is like a knife. You can use it to harm someone, or you can use it to prepare a great tasting meal. The tool itself isn't good or evil, the intent behind it makes all the difference.

Right now, many current examples of behavioural design do more harm than good. Retailers push us into impulsive buys with fake urgency. Streaming services are engineered to keep us watching, not resting. Even charities sometimes use guilt, not hope, to drive donations.

But here's what most people miss:
The exact same techniques can also be used to help people get what they actually want.



Because let's be honest. No one wakes up hoping to binge junk food, scroll mindlessly, or make choices they'll regret.

What people truly want is surprisingly universal. To eat better. Move more. Save money. Focus at work. And spend real time with the people they love.

And it's not just personal choices. Nobody wants to live in an unfair society, be ruled by authoritarians, have garbage littering their neighborhoods, or watch talented teachers leave the profession. We want thriving communities, engaged citizens, clean environments, and quality education for our children.

The problem isn't that people lack good intentions, it's that our systems and environments are often designed to work against what we collectively want to achieve.

What if instead of shying away from behavioural techniques because they feel "manipulative," we embraced them as tools for good? What if we designed environments that made healthy choices easier, savings automatic, and meaningful work more engaging?

This is the massive missed opportunity sitting right in front of us. While everyone else argues about whether behavioural psychology is ethical, we can be using it to help people bridge the gap between what they want and what they actually do.



How to Use this Guide



This isn't academic theory. It's a practical toolkit organized around three levels where ethical considerations matter most:



Organisational Level:

How to build ethics into your company culture.



Personal & Team Level:

Tools for self-reflection and team alignment on ethical standards.



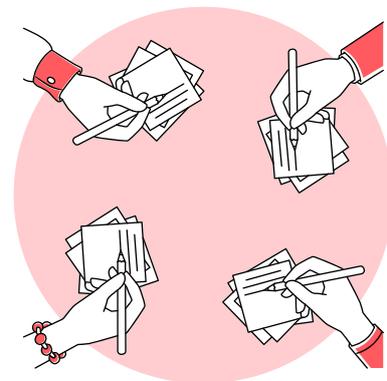
Project Level:

Checklists and frameworks to apply in projects.

Each section includes specific tools you can implement immediately. Some will feel obvious, others might challenge your current practices. All of them are based on real experience working with hundreds of professionals who wrestle with these same questions.

Ready to dive in?

Let's start with the foundation...



Part 1:

Building Ethical Foundations at the Organisational Level



The most important ethical decisions happen before you ever start a project. They happen when you choose who to work with, what problems to solve, and how to structure your organisation around human value.

Your mission as your moral compass.

If you want to design ethical behavioural interventions, you need a mission that explicitly puts human progress at its center. Not just profit. Not just efficiency. Progress for the people you're trying to influence.

Our mission is simple: **Help people unlock the power of Behavioural Design to thrive at work, in life, and in the world around them.**

Notice what's missing? Any mention of our success, our growth, or our profits. Those things matter, but they're outcomes of serving our mission, not the mission itself.

What this looks like in practice:

- We turn down lucrative projects that don't align with helping people progress.
- We regularly ask ourselves: "Will this genuinely improve someone's life?"
- When we're unsure, we default to the side of human benefit.



Your turn: Write a one-sentence mission statement that puts human progress first. If you can't honestly say your current work serves that mission, it's time to have some difficult conversations.

Who you Work With Matters More than you Think

Having a great mission is meaningless if you're not selective about who you work with. This is where ethics gets practical, and sometimes uncomfortable.

We've turned down projects worth thousands of euros because they didn't align with our mission. Not because the clients were evil people, but because the work wouldn't genuinely help people progress.

Industries we won't work with:



-  **Tobacco and gambling companies** (obvious manipulation of addiction)
-  **Fast fashion brands** (exploiting both workers and environmental concerns)
-  **Political campaign** focused on division rather than progress
-  Any company whose primary business model depends on **exploiting human vulnerabilities**

The grey areas that require tough conversations:



-  **Alcohol brands** (we might work on responsible drinking campaigns, but not on getting people to drink more)
-  **Oil companies investing in renewable energy** (we'd support genuine transition efforts, but not greenwashing)
-  **Social media platforms** (we'd help improve wellbeing features, but not engagement at any cost)
-  **Financial services** (we'd support financial literacy, but not predatory lending)
-  **Food companies** (we'd help promote healthier choices, but not if it's just marketing healthier-sounding junk food)

The key question we ask:

"Is this project primarily about helping people progress, or is it about getting them to do something that benefits the company at their expense?"



When the World isn't Black and White

Here's the reality: Most real-world projects live in the grey.

A food company wants to encourage healthier eating —and increase sales.

An oil company promotes its solar investments — while still drilling for oil.

A tech company improves user experience — but also needs engagement to drive revenue.

That doesn't make them manipulative by default.

It makes them real businesses, balancing commercial goals with broader responsibilities.

Let's be clear: There's nothing wrong with wanting to make money. We all operate in markets. We all need to grow. But it's the how that matters.

Ethical behavioural design doesn't mean being idealistic or soft. It means asking yourself: Can we drive results in a way that respects people's goals, not just our own?

Progress and profit don't have to be opposites but they do have to co-exist.



How we evaluate grey area projects:



Look for genuine commitment beyond the project:



Is the company actually investing significant resources in positive change?



Are they transparent about their challenges and contradictions?



Do they have concrete, measurable goals for progress (not just profit)?

Assess the specific project's impact:



Will this project genuinely help people make progress, even if the company benefits too?



Are we designing for long-term human benefit or short-term company gain?



Can we measure success in ways that prioritise human progress?



Example:

The oil company dilemma

An oil company wants to influence public opinion about their solar investments. Manipulation would be creating campaigns that overstate their green credentials while hiding continued fossil fuel expansion. Positive influence would be helping people understand genuine progress in renewable energy while being transparent about the transition timeline.

Common scenario:

The "healthy" food dilemma

A food company wants to promote "healthier choices" and asks you to influence people to choose their "low-fat" products over competitors. When you investigate, you discover their "healthy" options are loaded with sugar and artificial ingredients. Do you create messaging that focuses on the "low-fat" angle, or do you push back and suggest genuine nutrition education? This scenario happens more often than you'd think, and how you handle it defines whether you're manipulating or genuinely helping people progress.

Red flags that suggest manipulation:



"Can we make it more addictive?" (while compromising user wellbeing)



"How do we get people to spend more money?" (without considering if that's good for them)



"Our users just don't understand what's good for them" (dismissing genuine user concerns)



"Ethics are important, but first let's focus on results" (treating ethics as an afterthought)

Green flags that suggest genuine progress:



"How do we help people achieve their goals more easily?"



"What barriers prevent people from doing what they actually want to do?"



"How can we measure success in ways that include user wellbeing?"



"What unintended consequences should we watch for?"



"How do we balance our business needs with genuine human benefit?"

When you're in doubt, ask yourself:

"If my mum/best friend/child was the target of this influence, would I be comfortable with it?"



Building an Ethical Culture that Actually Works

Having the right mission and clients is just the start. The real challenge is embedding ethical thinking into your daily operations so it becomes automatic rather than an afterthought.

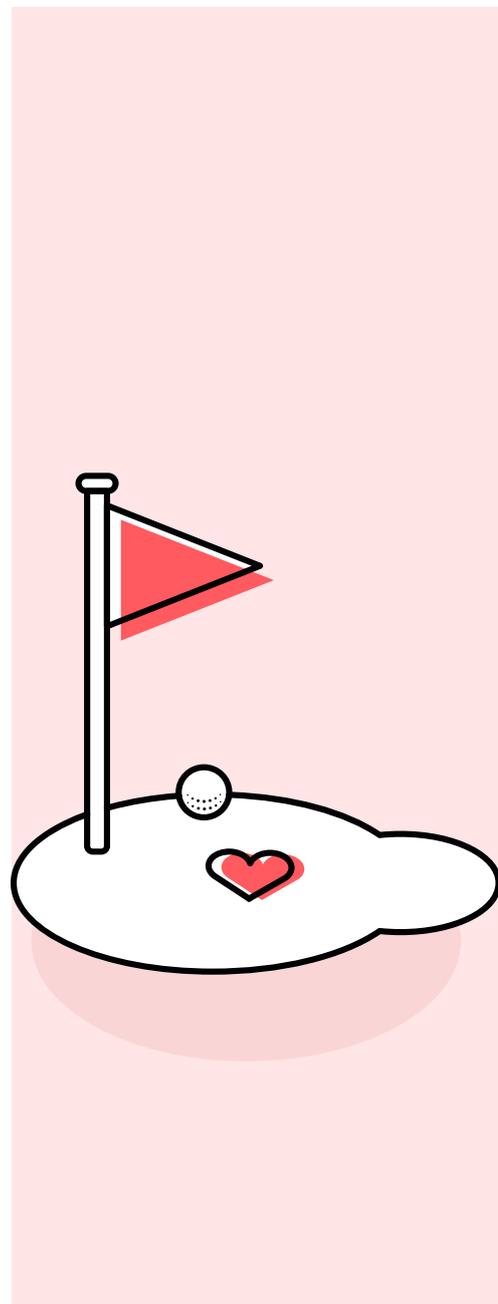
Create regular ethical check-ins:

Having the right mission and clients is just the start. The real challenge is embedding ethical thinking into your daily operations so it becomes automatic rather than an afterthought.

-  What ethical dilemmas did we face this month?
-  How did we handle them, and what would we do differently?
-  Are we seeing any patterns that suggest we need to adjust our approach?

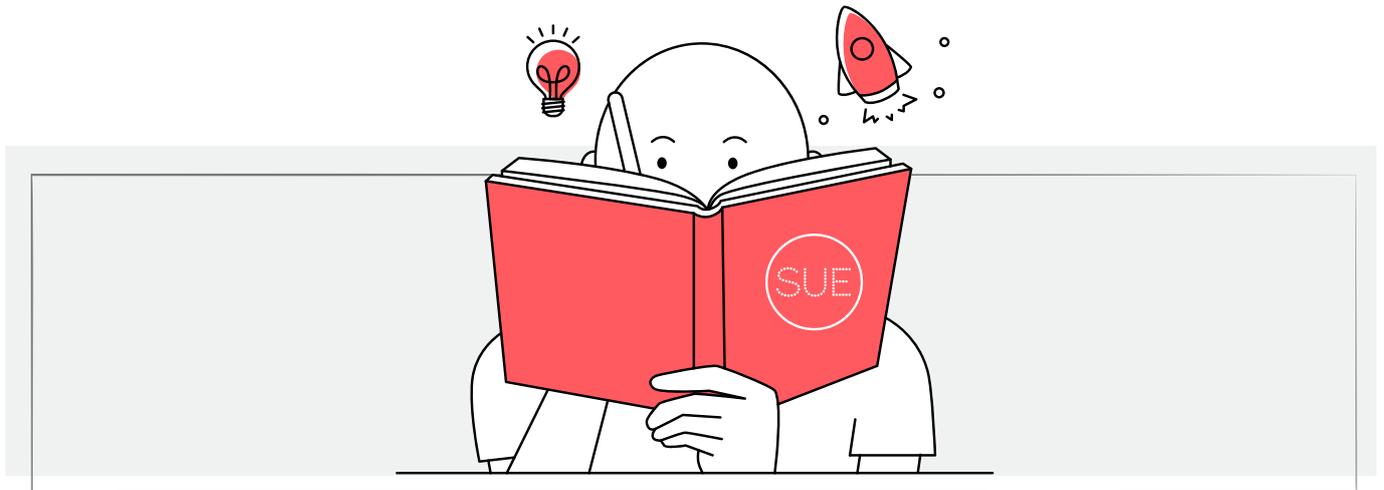
Make ethics visible:

Print out your guiding principles and put them where your team can see them. We have ours on the wall in our meeting room. It sounds simple, but when ethical principles are literally in your face during planning sessions, you're more likely to consider them.



Why visual reminders work:

When ethical principles are visible during planning sessions, team members naturally reference them during discussions. Someone might point to "Seek evidence, not assumptions" during a heated debate about user behaviour, immediately shifting the conversation from arguing opinions to planning research.



Hire for ethical alignment:

Skills can be taught. Values are much harder to change. During interviews, ask candidates about ethical dilemmas they've faced in their work. How they think about these trade-offs tells you more about future performance than their portfolio.

Create safe spaces for ethical concerns:

People need to feel comfortable raising ethical red flags without being seen as "difficult" or "not team players." Explicitly reward people who speak up about potential issues, even if it slows down a project.

Your Ethical Principles Toolkit



Every organisation needs concrete principles to guide decision-making. Here's our refined set, feel free to adapt them to your context:

1

Always put humans first:

When business goals and human benefit conflict, start with human benefit and find creative ways to align business goals with it.

2

See people as capable, not broken:

Instead of "users don't understand," ask "what barriers prevent people from succeeding?"

3

Seek evidence, not assumptions:

Don't assume you know what people want. Ask them. Test your interventions. Measure the outcomes that matter to them, not just to you.

4

Think outside-in:

Start with understanding people's real goals and contexts before designing your influence strategy.

5

Make progress as easy as possible:

Help people move forward by removing unnecessary complexity and lowering the threshold for positive action.

6

Consider unintended consequences:

Ask "What could go wrong?" and "Who might this harm?" for every intervention.

7

Protect privacy and autonomy:

People should understand how they're being influenced and have genuine choice in the matter.

8

Never lie:

This includes lies of omission, misleading implications, and "technically true" statements that create false impressions.



9

Fight injustice:

Consider whether your interventions might disadvantage already vulnerable groups.

10

Design for long-term benefit:

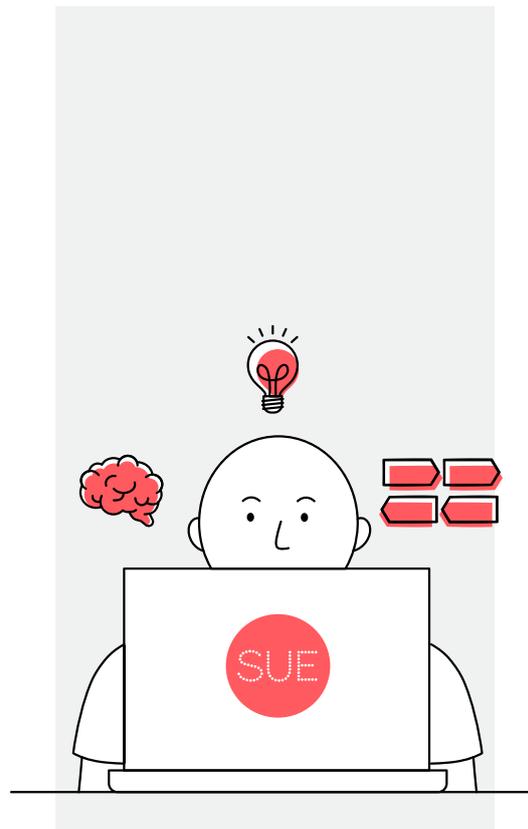
Short-term wins that create long-term problems are manipulation, not progress.

The key is turning these from nice-sounding statements into practical decision-making tools.

Print them.

Reference them in project plans.

Use them to evaluate proposals.



Part 2:

Personal & Team Level - Building your Ethical Muscle



Having the right organisational foundation is essential, but ethics ultimately comes down to the decisions you make as an individual and how you work together as a team. This is where the rubber meets the road.



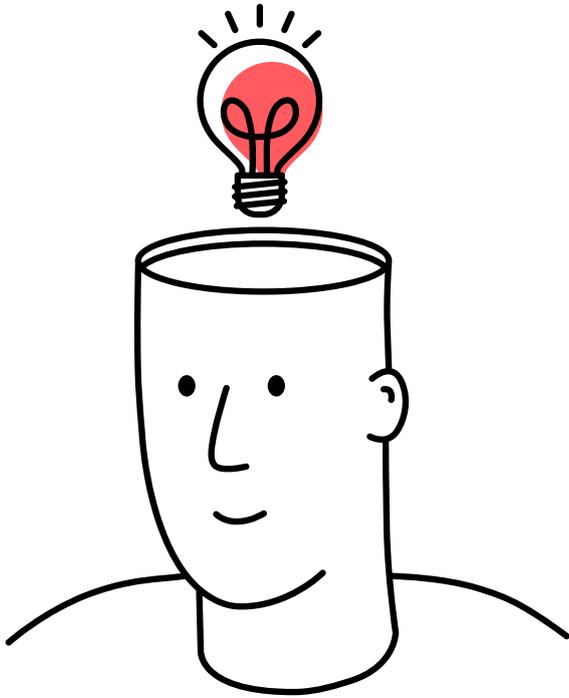
The ethical retrospective habit

The most important thing you can do for your ethical development is learn from your experiences. But here's the problem: we're all busy, and reflection often gets skipped when deadlines loom.

That's why we've built what we call the "ethical retrospective habit", a simple routine that makes ethical learning automatic rather than optional.

After every project, ask yourself these five questions:

- 1. What happened during this project that triggered emotions within me?**
(Excitement, discomfort, pride, doubt, all of these are valuable signals)
- 2. How did I feel about the project's impact on the people we influenced?**
(Positive? Conflicted? Proud? Worried?)
- 3. What insights can I draw from this experience?** (What did I learn about ethical decision-making, team dynamics, or client relationships?)
- 4. How can I apply what I learned to improve future projects?**
(What would I do differently? What worked well?)
- 5. What actions will I take based on what I learned?** (Specific, concrete steps, not just good intentions)



Make it a habit by:

- ✔ Scheduling 15 minutes after each project ends (put it in your calendar)
- ✔ Writing down your answers (thinking isn't enough, write it down)
- ✔ Sharing insights with your team when appropriate
- ✔ Reviewing your past retrospectives quarterly to spot patterns

The goal isn't to achieve perfection. It's to build the muscle of ethical reflection so it becomes second nature.

Know yourself:

Values, Blind Spots, and Trigger Points



You can't make ethical decisions if you don't understand your own biases, values, and emotional triggers. Most of us think we know ourselves better than we do.

Discover your core values:

Write down the **three most important values that guide your life** (not what you think you should value, but what actually drives your decisions).

Examples: fairness, creativity, security, freedom, collaboration, excellence.

Now ask yourself:

- How do these values show up in your work?
- When have they been in conflict?
- When have you compromised them, and how did it feel?

Identify your blind spots:

We all have them. Maybe you consistently underestimate how long projects will take. Maybe you avoid difficult conversations. Maybe you assume others share your priorities.

A simple blind spot exercise:

Ask three people you work closely with: **"What's one thing I consistently don't see or consider that affects my decision-making?"** Their answers might surprise you.



The Johari Window tool

can help you systematically identify these blind spots through structured feedback exercises.

[Download now on our website](#)



Recognise your trigger points:

What situations make you more likely to compromise your ethics? Common triggers include:

- Tight deadlines and pressure
- Difficult clients who push boundaries
- Financial stress or targets
- Peer pressure or wanting to fit in
- Overconfidence after recent successes

When you know your triggers, you can prepare for them rather than being blindsided.



Common trigger scenario:

Clients often say things like *"we're behind schedule, can we skip the user research and just go with what we think works?"* The pressure to be helpful can lead to agreeing to things you know are wrong.

Having a prepared response helps:
"I understand the urgency. Let's look at which elements we can streamline without compromising the core human insights we need." You'll be surprised how often clients find extra time when you frame it this way.



Team alignment:

Getting Everyone on The Same Page

Individual ethics matter, but teams make decisions collectively. If you're not aligned on ethical standards, you'll end up with inconsistent decisions and internal conflict.

The values alignment exercise:

Have each team member privately write down their top three work-related values. Then share them as a group.

You'll likely discover:

- Some values everyone shares (these become your team's core values)
- Some values that differ but complement each other
- Some values that potentially conflict (these need discussion)

Create your team's ethical

agreement: Based on your shared values and this guide, develop 3-5 specific commitments about how you'll work together. For example:

- "We commit to raising concerns about potential ethical issues without judgment"
- "We agree to prioritise long-term human benefit over short-term metrics"
- "We will be transparent with clients about our methods and limitations"

Practice difficult conversations:

Most ethical dilemmas involve navigating disagreement or uncomfortable conversations.

Practice as a team:

- Role-play common ethical scenarios you might face
- Discuss how you'll handle it when team members disagree on ethical questions
- Agree on escalation processes for when you can't reach consensus



The goal isn't to eliminate all ethical disagreement, different perspectives make for better decisions. The goal is to have productive disagreements that lead to better outcomes.

Part 3:

Project level - Ethics in Action



This is where theory meets reality. You've got a client, a deadline, and pressure to deliver results. How do you maintain ethical standards when things get messy?



The Comprehensive Behavioural Design Ethics Checklist

[Download now on our website](#)

Before you start any Behavioural Design project, run through this comprehensive three-stage checklist covering Project Intake, Project Preparation, and Intervention Evaluation. It takes 10 minutes and can save you months of regret.

Below you'll find an overview of reflective questions to ask yourself. For a more practical tool, visit our website and download the free set of Behavioural Design Ethics Cards, a handy resource to guide you through the right questions at the right time.

Stage 1:

Project Intake Questions

Human Benefit Assessment:

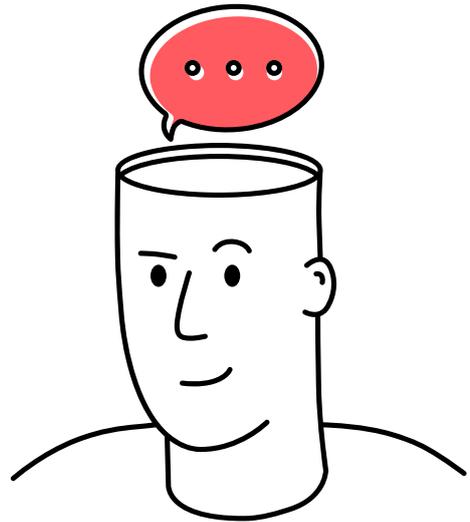
-  What specific progress will this project help people make?
-  How will we measure success from the user's perspective (not just the client's)?
-  Who might be harmed by this intervention, even unintentionally?
-  Are we solving a real problem or creating artificial demand?

Transparency & Consent:

-  Will people understand how they're being influenced?
-  Do they have genuine choice in the matter?
-  Are we being honest about the trade-offs involved?
-  Can people easily opt out if they want to?

Long-term Impact:

- What happens if this intervention works too well?
- How might this affect vulnerable populations?
- Are we creating sustainable positive change or just temporary behaviour shifts?
- What's the worst-case scenario if our intervention has unintended consequences?



Stage 2: Project Preparation

Research & Evidence:

- Have we tested our assumptions with real users?
- Are we designing based on evidence or our own biases?
- What don't we know that could affect the intervention's impact?

Stakeholder Alignment:

- Does everyone involved understand the ethical standards we're applying?
- Are there conflicting objectives that need to be resolved?
- Have we identified potential pressure points where ethics might be compromised?

Stage 3:

Intervention Evaluation

Impact Monitoring:

- 🔍 Are we tracking both intended and unintended consequences?
- 🔍 How are people actually responding to our intervention?
- 🔍 What adjustments do we need to make based on real-world feedback?

Continuous Assessment:

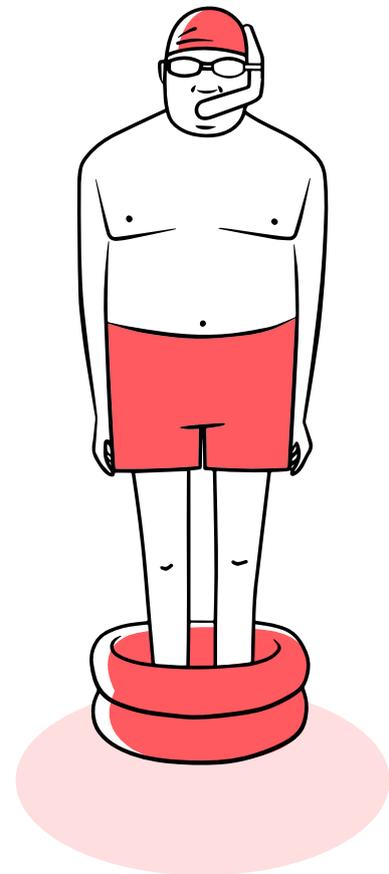
- 🔍 Are our original ethical assumptions still valid?
- 🔍 What have we learned that should inform future projects?
- 🔍 Would we still be comfortable with this intervention if it became public?

If you can't answer these questions satisfactorily, either refine the project scope or decline the work.

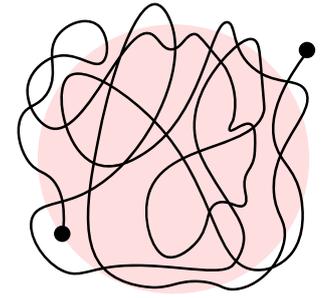


Common scenario:

The productivity trap A large corporation wants to "increase employee motivation" because productivity is down. The brief focuses on getting people to work longer hours and show more enthusiasm. But what if your intake questions reveal the real problem: employees feel overworked and undervalued? Do you design interventions to push harder work, or do you address the underlying issues? The ethical path often leads to better business results—but it requires courage to challenge the initial brief.



The Human Value Compass: your Quick Decision Tool



When you're in the middle of a project and need to make a fast ethical decision, use this simple three-part test:



Truth:

Is what we're doing/saying honest and transparent?

- No lies, no misleading implications, no "technically true" statements that create false impressions
- People should understand what's happening and why



Feasibility:

Is what we're promising actually achievable?

- Don't promise outcomes you can't deliver
- Be realistic about timelines and expected results
- Consider people's actual capabilities and constraints



Human Value:

Does this genuinely help people progress in their work, life, or environment?

- Will this make their life, work, or environment better?
- Are we solving their problem or just creating dependence on our solution?
- Does the benefit to them justify the effort we're asking from them?

If any answer is "no," stop and redesign before proceeding.

Managing Cognitive Biases in Real Time



Here's an uncomfortable truth: You will make biased decisions, especially under pressure. The goal isn't to eliminate bias (impossible) but to catch it before it derails your ethics.

[Download now on our website](#)



The most dangerous biases in Behavioural Design work:

Confirmation bias: Seeking evidence that supports what we want to believe

Antidote: Actively look for evidence that contradicts your assumptions

Practice: Ask "What would prove me wrong?" before finalising any intervention

Overconfidence bias: Believing we understand people better than we do

Antidote: Test everything with real users in real contexts

Practice: Say "I think" instead of "people always" or "users never"

System justification: Defending the status quo even when it's harmful

Antidote: Regularly question whether current systems serve people well

Practice: Ask "What if we started from scratch?"

Availability bias: Overweighting recent or memorable examples

Antidote: Look at broader data and longer time frames

Practice: Ask "Is this pattern or just a few vivid examples?"



The most dangerous biases in Behavioural Design work:

Hindsight bias: "We knew this would work all along"

Antidote: Document your assumptions and reasoning before seeing results

Practice: Review your initial predictions against actual outcomes

Small numbers effect: Drawing big conclusions from limited data

Antidote: Always consider sample sizes and statistical significance

Practice: Ask "How much data do we really have here?"

WYSIATI ("What you see is all there is"): Ignoring missing information

Antidote: Actively seek out what might be missing from your view

Practice: Ask "What aren't we seeing?" before making decisions



The bias check routine:

Before making any significant project decision, ask: "What bias might be affecting my judgment right now?" Then actively seek information that challenges your initial instinct.

When Things Go Wrong: Ethical Crisis Management



Despite your best intentions, sometimes things go sideways. An intervention has unintended consequences. A client pushes you to do something that feels wrong. Your team discovers problems mid-project.

The ethical crisis protocol:

Step 1: Pause and Assess

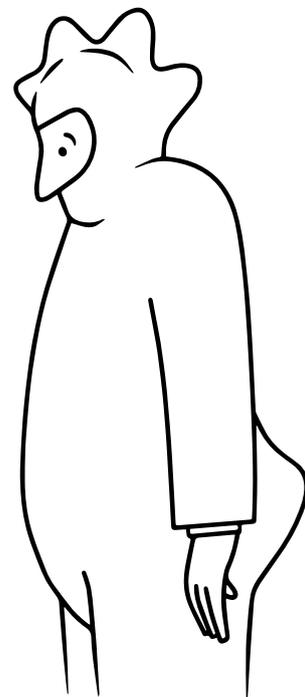
- What exactly has gone wrong or feels wrong?
- Who is being harmed or might be harmed?
- How immediate is the risk?

Step 2: Gather Perspectives

- What do affected users/people think?
- What does your team think?
- What would an objective outsider think?

Step 3: Consider your Options

- Can you modify the approach to address the problem?
- Do you need to pause the project while you redesign?
- Is the right answer to stop the project entirely?

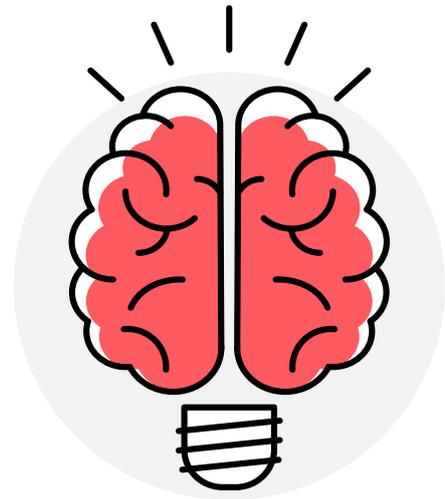


Step 4: Communicate Transparently

- Tell your client what you've discovered and why it matters
- Explain your recommended course of action
- Be prepared to walk away if they won't address legitimate ethical concerns

Step 5: Document and Learn

- Record what happened and why
- What does your team think?
- Share lessons with your team
- Update your processes to prevent similar issues



Remember:

Your reputation is built over years and can be destroyed in days. It's always better to have difficult conversations early than to deal with ethical disasters later.

Scenario: When success becomes the problem

Imagine you're halfway through a project to increase app engagement, and your interventions work too well—people are using the app compulsively, including during family time and late at night. Usage is up 300%, but user wellbeing surveys show increased stress and relationship problems. The client loves the numbers. What do you do? This is where your ethical framework gets tested. Do you prioritise the client's immediate happiness or long-term human wellbeing?

The Post-Project Reality Check

After every project, before you celebrate the results, do this final ethical assessment:

Impact Assessment:

-  Did we deliver the human progress we promised?
-  What unintended consequences have emerged?
-  How do the people we influenced feel about the experience?
-  Would we be comfortable if everyone knew exactly how we influenced behaviour in this project?

Process Assessment:

-  Where did we compromise our ethical standards, and why?
-  What pressures led us away from our values?
-  How can we structure future projects to avoid these pressures?
-  What would we do differently next time?

Relationship Assessment:

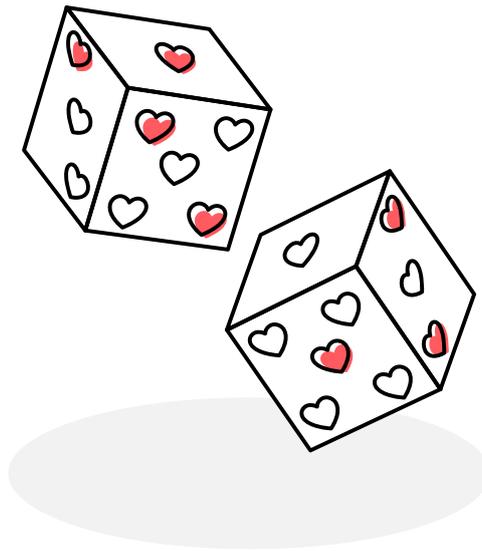
-  Do we still feel good about working with this client?
-  Did this project align with our mission and values?
-  Are we proud to have this work in our portfolio?
-  What did we learn about our own ethical boundaries?

This isn't about achieving perfection—it's about continuous improvement and staying true to your values even when it's difficult.

The Choice is Yours

We're at a turning point. Behavioural science is more powerful and accessible than ever before. You can see its effects everywhere: in the apps that capture our attention, the products we buy, the political messages we receive, and the environments we navigate daily.

The question isn't whether behavioural influence will shape our world. It already is. The question is: **What kind of influence will you choose to create?**



The Daily Benefits of Getting this Right

When you use Behavioural Design ethically, something interesting happens: you don't just help others, you become more effective at everything you do.

You'll understand what actually works.

Instead of guessing why people do or don't respond to your ideas, you'll have frameworks for understanding human behaviour. You'll stop wasting time on ideas that sound good but don't create real change.

You'll save time and energy.

When you focus on genuine human needs instead of trying to force unwanted behaviours, people cooperate rather than resist. Projects move faster. Clients trust your recommendations. You spend less time fixing problems and more time creating solutions.

You'll build stronger relationships.

Colleagues, clients, and stakeholders can sense when you genuinely have their interests at heart. This builds the kind of trust that makes everything else easier, from getting buy-in on proposals to navigating difficult conversations.

You'll become more persuasive.

Paradoxically, when you stop trying to manipulate people and start helping them achieve their own goals, you become much more influential. People want to work with professionals who understand their real challenges and offer genuine solutions.

You'll feel better about your work.

There's a deep satisfaction that comes from knowing your professional skills are making people's lives genuinely better. You'll go home feeling proud of what you've accomplished rather than conflicted about it.

It's Not Just About You



Every time you choose ethical influence over manipulation, you're also contributing to a culture that values human progress over exploitation. You're demonstrating that behavioural design can be both effective and ethical. You're showing clients and colleagues that there's a better way to do this work.

Your Practical Next Steps



Don't wait for perfect clarity or complete confidence. Start with small steps this week:

- Write your one-sentence mission statement
- Print out the ethical principles that resonate with you and put them somewhere visible
- Try the Human Value Compass on your next project decision
- Schedule 15 minutes after your current project to run through the ethical retrospective questions

As you build these habits, you'll find that ethical decision-making becomes more natural, not harder. You'll develop the confidence to have difficult conversations. You'll create work that makes you genuinely proud.

The Techniques are in Your Hands

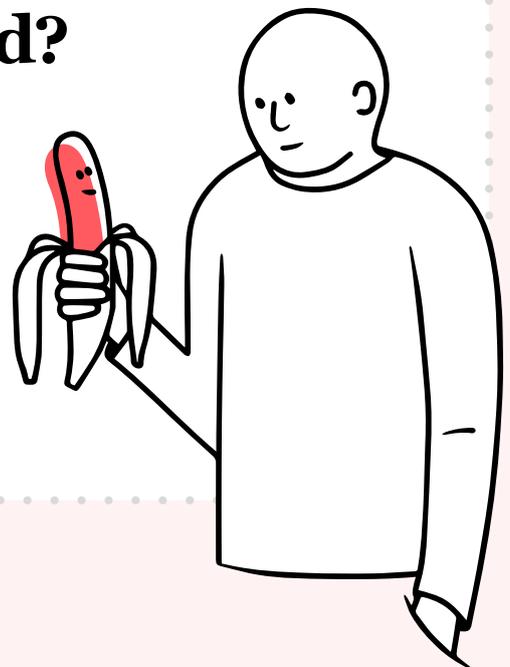


This isn't about being perfect or changing the world overnight.

It's about being intentional with the influence you already have.

It's about using behavioural design to help people bridge the gap between what they want and what they actually do—while making your own work more effective, your relationships stronger, and your professional life more satisfying.

**So, the final question is:
What will you build?**





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