Behavioural Design Ethics

A booklet with our vision and actions.

SUE | Behavioural Design

Know-how of behavioural psychology can be a powerful tool to shape choices and behaviour. Therefore in Behavioural Design, thinking about ethics and acting upon them is not just relevant - it is indispensable. That's why we have created this toolkit for Behavioural Design ethics: **to make sure we leverage this awesome power to do good good.**

This booklet is all about a subject that is very close to our hearts: the ethics of Behavioural Design. It will shed a light unto how we incorporate ethics in our way of working. It will also provide you with practical tools to help you pinpoint the considerations you need to make to safeguard the ethics in Behavioural Design.

It is our take on things. It isn't perfect yet. It is ever-evolving work-in-progress, but it is a solid start. I would love for you to read the whole post, but you can also jumpstart to specific parts right way:

- Manipulation or positive influence?
- Behavioural Design ethics: The Organisation Level
- Behavioural Design ethics: The Personal and Team Level
- Behavioural Design ethics: The Project Level
- How Behavioural Design ethics make both human and business sense
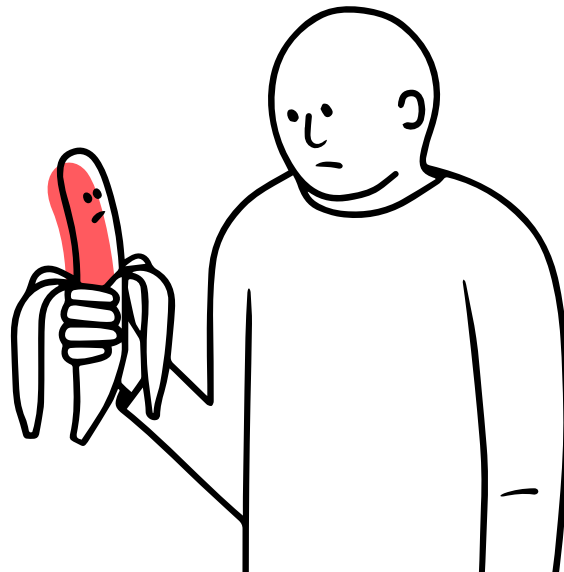
The SUE | Behavioural Design team

Manipulation or influence?

When engaging in Behavioural Design, there is one critical question to ask ourselves: Are we in the manipulation business or are we designing positive influence? It is vital to address the ethics of Behavioural Design.

Know-how of behavioural science can be a potent tool to influence choices and shape decisions. It can be a very dark art. It can, for example, be (and is) used to get people hooked to phones or unhealthy foods, to manipulate voting behaviours or create division in society. It can be used to exploit peoples' fears and anxieties.

However, it can also be applied to help people engage in healthier habits such as exercising or eating healthy food or to create a better world by for example helping people to recycle, to act against climate change or to help others in need. Therefore, behavioural science in itself isn't dark art as such; it is what you do with it. It is all comes down to intention.

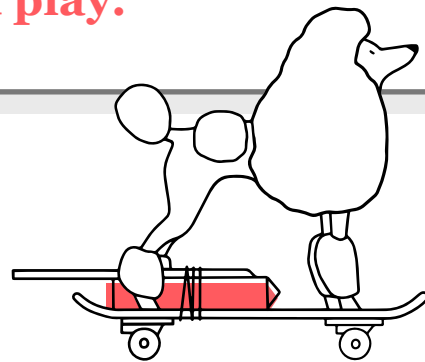" If your intention is to help people make better decisions that will improve their life, work or living environment, that's a positive influence.

If your intention is not the progress or the improvement of the person(s) you are trying to influence, then you are manipulating. "

At SUE | Behavioural Design, we are very much concerned about the ethics of applied behavioural science.

Our Mission

To unlock the power of behavioural psychology to help people make better decisions in work life, and play.

That's why we at SUE are on a crusade to introduce more people to the know-how of behavioural science and provide them with the practical tools to use it in their daily lives.

As we are in the business of designing interventions that will influence choice and shape behaviour, we need to have a clear vision of the ethics of Behavioural Design and code of conduct. As mentioned earlier, the know-how of how people make decisions and how behaviour is shaped can be very dark art. Unfortunately, the people who are now really using behavioural science at scale often don't have good intentions. And that, to us, is manipulation. It is meant for personal advancement or meant to benefit a privileged few.

So, people can genuinely apply Behavioural Design to improve their own lives, that of others and the planet we live on. And to make them more resistant to dark attempts at influencing? This is the reason for the founding of our SUE | Behavioural Design Academy© and writing a book on Behavioural Design: To give more people the tools to use Behavioural Design for good.

So, our company mission implies that we should walk the talk. We simply have to have a clear vision of the ethics of Behavioural Design and we have to abide by that vision in practice. Unfortunately, there isn't already a commonly accepted code of conduct in the behavioural science field. However, there are some interesting resources out there of organisations and people who want to use this powerful know-how for good. In this article, we want to provide you with insights and tools that we use as our ethical compass.
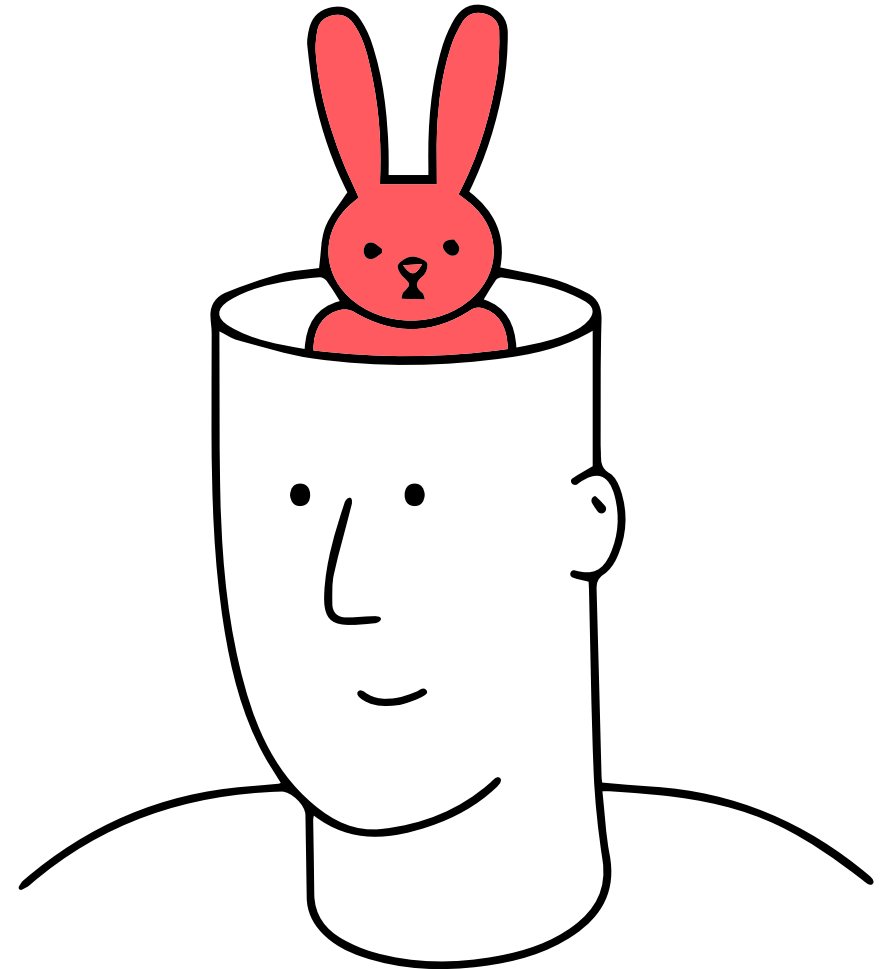
Insights and tools which can be applied on three levels:

- **The Organisational level**
- **The Personal and Team level**
- **The Project level**

We hope it will give you some practical guidelines on how to use Behavioural Design for positive influence.

It isn't perfect yet. We are prototyping and learning every day. It is constant work in progress that we will keep sharing with you. **Our goal is to be very open and transparent about how we try to safeguard the ethics of Behavioural Design and how sometimes we struggle with it.**

We hope you in this for the sake of progress, improvement, better decision-making and positive behaviour, and you will embrace our tools and best practices. Let's create a positive countermovement by together applying Behavioural Design for good. Counterbalancing and exposing those who use it with evil or selfish intentions.

Organisational Level

📢 **I. Mission and company culture**

At an organisational level, it all starts with having an **actionable mission** that has progress in its DNA. And that is backed up by the willingness and capability within the organisation to act upon it.

This requires a mandate from management. But also a **company culture** that attracts talent and clients who fit and believe in this mission and that rejects those who don't.

It also requires a company culture that is open to discussions. We live by our Behavioural Ethics Principles.

- Always put humans first
- See issues in terms of human vulnerabilities instead of bad intentions
- Don't rely on assumptions but seek evidence
- Think outside-in, let empathy be your guide
- Help people make better decisions
- Make the desired behaviours as simple as possible
- Aim for scaling and sustaining positive behaviours
- Combine growth with responsibility
- Always consider potential and uneven risks or unintended consequences
- Fight injustice and do not intentionally harm in any way
- Protect privacy
- Never lie

Guiding Ethical Principles

1. Always put humans first
2. See issues in terms of human vulnerabilities instead of bad intentions
3. Don't rely on assumptions but seek evidence
4. Think outside-in, let empathy be your guide
5. Help people make better decisions
6. Make the desired behaviours as simple as possible
7. Aim for scaling and sustaining positive behaviours
8. Combine growth with responsibility
9. Always consider potential and uneven risks or unintended consequences
10. Fight injustice and do not intentionally harm in any way
11. Protect privacy
12. Don't Lie

II. Selection of clients and projects

Next to the mission and principles, we also safeguard our Behavioural Design ethics by carefully selecting the projects we engage in and the people with whom we work. Both at SUE and our Academy, we aren't one-size-fits-all.

Even in the days when we still were a small-scale company with not much money in the bank, we decided always to put our mission first and **be selective in who we work for and who can participate in our training.** We will never work for or train people working in industries that harm people, animals, the planet or neglect social and equality rights (if you want to find out more check out our Terms & Conditions). We will not sell our souls to the devil, not for a million. Or more.

However, the world isn't as black and white, and sometimes we find ourselves in shades of grey. This can result in difficult decisions. Decisions which we always genuinely try to make based on our moral compass, and which are still open to discussion for anyone within our company.

III. Ongoing discussions

That being said: We do have ongoing conversations in our team about projects we work on. Not working for the fur, tobacco or weapon industry is an easy decision to make. But should you work for an alcoholic beer brand or only for their 0% beers? Or milk? Or the oil industry if they want you to work on their transition to sustainable energy?

There aren't always clear-cut answers to this and they always lead to different points-of-view. This is one way we try to safeguard our ethics: **by actively and purposefully keeping the ethical discussion alive in our team.** This code of ethics you are reading right now and the tools that come with it help us define the boundaries.

Sometimes boundaries change because we learn.

And there are, of course, always loopholes. We had someone who 'slipped' into our Academy by applying via a Gmail address and faking his employer details. And we failed to do a sufficient background check. He turned out to work for a cigarette brand. That was not one of our finest moments, and our background checks are far more thorough now - trust me. But we don't have and will never have a complete sense of control over who reads our blogs, sees our Keynotes, uses our tools, watches our videos or will buy our books. We know this, and we are aware of it.

IV. A positive perspective on human nature

We just don't want to live our lives with a negative perspective on human nature. We hope everything we do at SUE | Behavioural Design and the SUE | Behavioural Design Academy© will spread massively, and **we genuinely believe the intentions of the majority of people are not bad.** We refuse to believe that. We as people are just sometimes clumsy, too emotional or merely incapable.

If you look at people as humans who are trying their best, they can sometimes fail because of the context they find themselves in. Heavily influenced by biases, past experiences and short-cuts, this lowers your pessimism about human nature. *Try judging people through the lens of 'good people, bad circumstances'[1], and I assure you it will take the edge off your annoyances and will foster empathy and a belief that the majority of people mean well.*
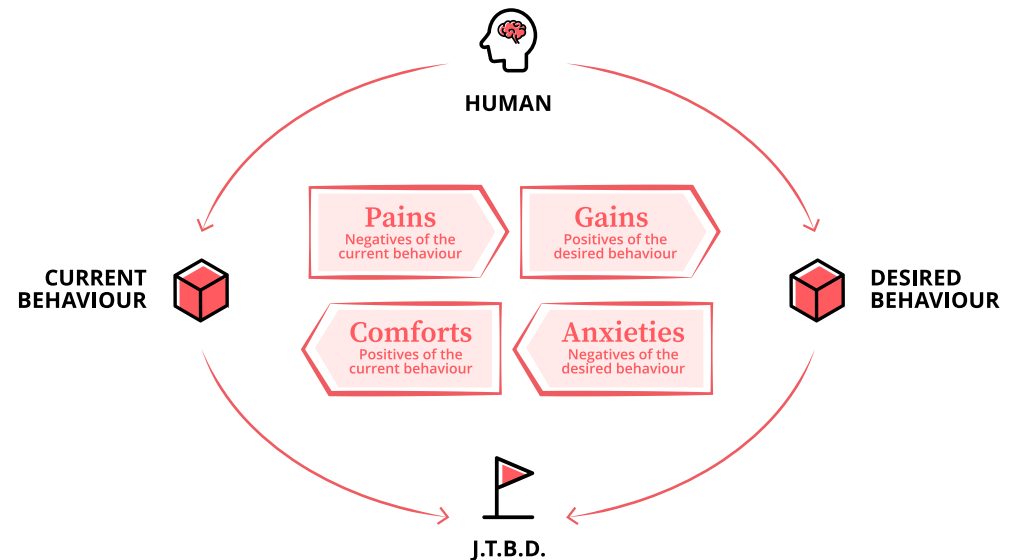
We as SUE want to give more tools to these masses to help them make better decisions. Will we also reach the 2% asshole population? Maybe. If you recognise yourself as being an asshole, go away now. Our services and tools aren't meant for you. Black-out what we have written, burn our writings, shred our tools. We don't care, whatever makes your black heart tick. But leave. Now.

V. SUE | Influence Framework©

But it's not just the way you look at things; it is also the way you act. As said, whether Behavioural Design is a pearl of dark or enlightened wisdom all starts at intent. Is your intention to do harm or good? Is it about shareholder value alone? Or are you genuinely trying to add human value? Which can also make you good money by the way. **We have developed the SUE | Influence Framework©, a powerful tool to understand human decision-making and the forces that drive or block behaviour.**

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[1] *A quote we read in Caroline Webb's book 'How to have a good day'.*

The SUE | Influence Framework© helps to turn human insights into tangible interventions that will spark positive action. It is a systematic approach to think outside-in instead of inside-out. It will put humans first and not yourself. **The framework in itself is all about progress:**

- Can we resolve pains?
- Can we enlarge gains?
- Can we take away anxieties?
- Can we create better comforts?
- Can we make sure we can help people achieve their job(s)-to-be-done in a better way?

We would love for every organisation to start using the SUE | Influence Framework© (we can help you apply it in a Behavioural Design Sprint or teach you how to use it yourself in our Academy). Still, the more important point we want to make here is that **embedding a workable method in your organisation that genuinely puts humans first, is key to designing for good.** Of course, the SUE | Influence Framework© is the best way to do this but on a more serious note: it helps us and the clients we work for to grasp human decision-making truly.

It reveals that often people have the best intentions, but stumble upon behavioural barriers and bottlenecks that prevent them from doing the better or right thing.

So apart from the framework helping you to become radically human-centred and discovering the human behind your client, employee, citizen or whomever you are trying to influence, it also is a revelation as it shows that having a positive perspective on human nature is indeed not just touchy-feely but a methodical process.

VI. Design for large scale impact

What is a work in progress to us is making the shift from more individualistic (or small group) behavioural interventions to influencing **collective behaviour.**

To have a genuinely positive impact, you need to reach a certain point of adoption. **Coming up with system interventions and creating network effects is a way we can design for good on a larger scale.**

One way we are working on this is that we are adding quantitative research to our SUE | Behavioural Design Method© to substantiate our behavioural insights and find evidence for the weight of the behaviour drivers of a problem.

Another way is that we are looking to run pilot projects after our prototyping tests to discover that we can scale the behavioural interventions and test their positive impact on a larger scale. **We believe future lies in connecting behavioural science with network science and systems thinking.** We haven't gotten all our ducks in a row just yet, but we are working on this.

Personal & Team Level

When it comes down to you, **you also have a significant role to play.** I guess the most important thing is always to be honest with yourself and to have a learning mindset. What I mean by this is that you have to accept that sometimes you will engage in activities that feel right at the moment, but you won't be happy with afterwards. And sometimes it is the other way around. That's okay.

> *The most important thing is that you learn from your experiences. We are firm believers of habits, automatic behaviours, that will help you shape your choices and behaviour without it taking too much cognitive effort. To activate this ethical learning effect, we have installed the ethical retrospective habit.*

I. The ethical retrospective habit

Try to make it a routine, after every project, to ask yourself these five questions[2] (or do it as a team):

- What happened during the project that triggered emotions within yourself?
- How did I feel (positive or negative) and what were my reactions?
- What insights or conclusions can I draw from the experience? What did I learn?
- How can I/we apply what I/we learned to improve the future experience?
- What actions can I (or we as a team) take based on what I/we learned?

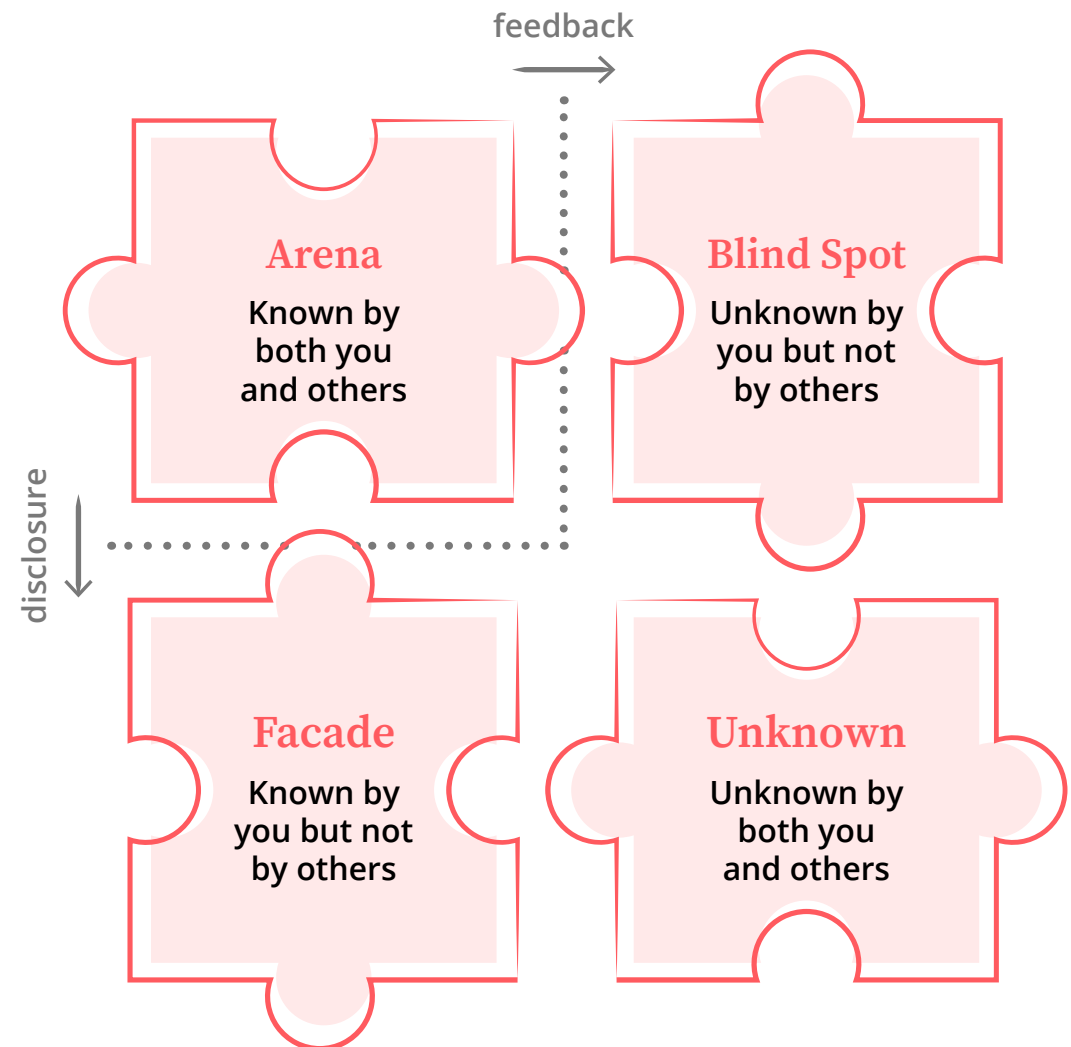*2 Inspired by: The Reflective Practitioner, Donald A. Schön, 1983*

II. Learn what matters to you and how to express this

If you want to do some more self-exploration, *check out this download by Alistair Sommerville, called the Little Book of Me[3].* It helps you pinpoint your values and enables you to get the conversation going within your team.

This is very important when it comes to ethics. **You need to understand which effect you have on other people.** You also need to learn how to express your opinions within a group. Shared understanding, empathy and self-awareness are the driving forces of making an ethical culture come to life.

A useful tool is the so-called **Johari Window.** It is also explained in the mentioned booklet, and we also made a download to explain the Johari Window[4]. It gives insight into your blind spots, which facades you pull up and what is usually out in the open or unknown to both you and others. It can be a handy team exercise to create mutual understanding and also apply outside-in thinking into your team discussions. See, if you find it a useful tool (or parts of it).

feedback

disclosure

Arena
Known by both you and others

Blind Spot
Unknown by you but not by others

Facade
Known by you but not by others

Unknown
Unknown by both you and others

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3 *http://ethicskit.org/downloads/little-book-of-me.pdf*

4 *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johari_window*

Project Level

What we are trying to do at the project level is to try to lower the risk of unintended consequences. We genuinely have good intentions, and we are stirred by our company mission to use Behavioural Design to improve human decision-making. But sometimes we don't see the complete project picture at the start of a project. And we are all influenced by our biases and mental mistakes.

So, we try to design behavioural interventions to solve these challenges. Although we know 100% perfection might be an illusion, you should always have the ambition to lead your projects as ethical as possible.

I. Behavioural Design Ethics Checklist & Cards

At the project level, you can add three behavioural interventions to safeguard the ethics relevant to your project. **First of all, we work with our Behavioural Design Ethics Checklist and Behavioural Design Ethics Cards**[5]. These help us ask the right questions at the right moment in three project stages; the Project Intake, the Project Preparation and the Intervention Evaluation.

These questions help us become aware of ethical considerations we need to keep in mind before we even start a project. But they also allow us to address (unintentional) side-effects of our behavioural interventions. Feel free to use these tools and adjust them to your mission statement. Just as long as your mission is to design for good, we are perfectly fine with that!

II. Cognitive Biases Checklist

The second way we safeguard our behavioural design ethics is to be aware of our own cognitive biases. We all are a slave to our system one and make (unconscious) mental mistakes or judgements of error based on the short-cuts our brain makes. However, no-one can ever completely override his/her system one thinking and decision-making process.

Kahneman once stated that people can improve their decision-making by forcing themselves to think more deeply. So, even your initial reactions will be modified[6].

We have created such a forcing function by making a short Cognitive Biases Checklist that we keep at hand during projects.

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5 Ethical toolkit.org and the BASIC toolkit have inspired our checklist and cards, but we have made them relevant for our way of working/company mission. Feel free to use them both and adjust them to your mission, as long as you design for good.

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RHmXPyX7czU&feature=emb_logo

It does help to force yourself to think more deeply about possible mental mistakes by literally reading the checklist with the most common cognitive biases. For example, before you start a meeting, do an interview or even as the first thing you do as the start of your workday. It both helps us to address the cognitive biases we as project team are dealing with and the biases the people for whom we are designing a behavioural intervention might have (and we need to consider).
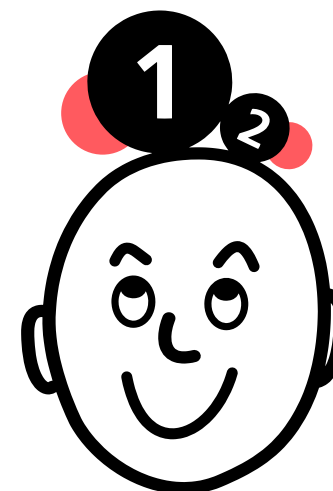
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By searching for biases (even as organisations or institutions), you can try to reduce the impact biases have on decisions, to avoid what Kahneman calls **a process of self-critique or quality control over decisions.** But within reason. You don't want too much of it.

What Kahneman calls *'paralysis by analysis'* but within reason, there is room to improve what you as a team do within a project by a form of quality control. To make your reading-the-checklist behaviour easier to perform, make sure you print the checklist and keep it at a spot where you can easily see it. Stick it on your wall or make a blow-up to hang up in your team meeting room.

Just one remark: This is in no means a complete overview of cognitive biases, far from it. If you want to know more about cognitive biases, we warmly recommend reading this blogpost of Buster Benson. If you wish to find out more about system one and system two thinking or in other words how human-decision making works, please read this blog post, and you're up-to-speed in no time.
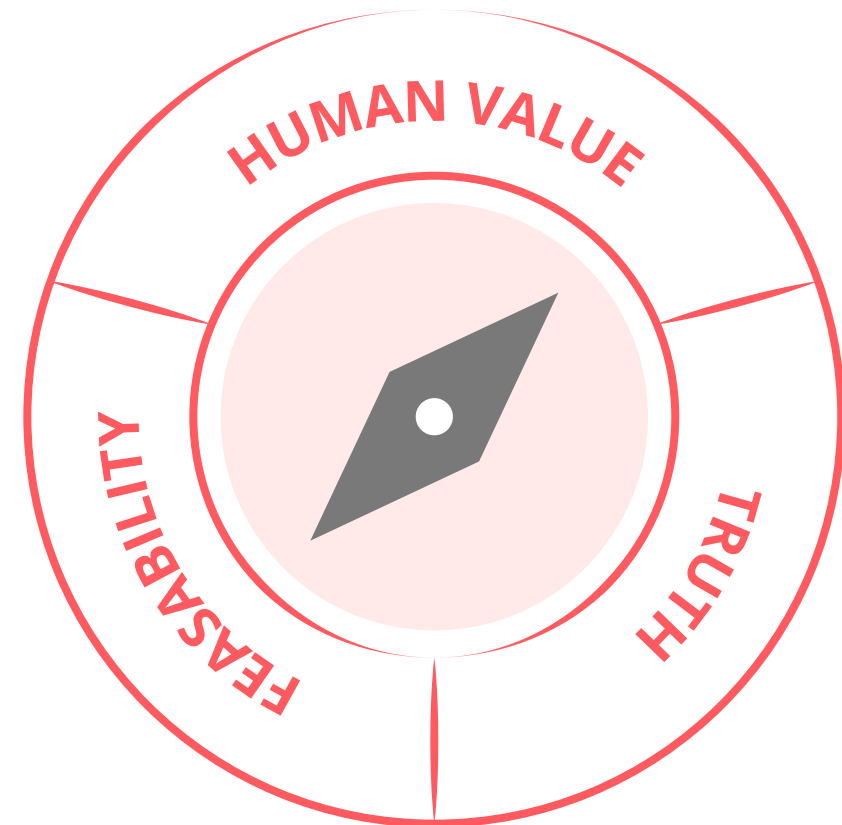
III. Human Value Compass

Safeguarding ethics in Behavioural Design is (unfortunately) never a 100% fool proof. We like to say your moral compass should lead your way. Using our SUE | Influence Framework© will already point you in the right direction, as this is all about creating progress.

We have also created a straightforward tool that helps us decide relatively quick and dirty, whether we are on the right track with our behavioural intervention or not. We have called it the **Human Value Compass,** and it a fast check makes you ask yourself three questions:

- Will it deliver human value?
- Is it true: no lying, whitewashing or sugar-coating?
- Is it achievable?

If not all of these questions can be answered with 'yes', it is time to abort the mission. The intervention leads you in the wrong direction. Back to the drawing table. As said, this is a quick check. For more thorough ethical considerations, we use our Behavioural Ethics Checklist & Cards.
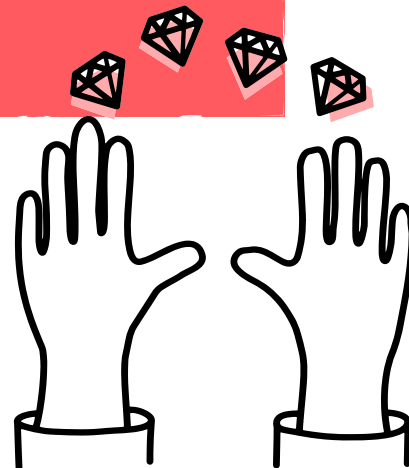
Conclusion

How Behavioural Design Ethics make both human and business sense.

Ethics in Behavioural Design is not just a relevant but indispensable topic to think about and act upon. Know-how of behavioural psychology can be a powerful tool to shape choices and behaviour. We have created this toolkit for Behavioural Design ethics to make sure we leverage this power to do good.

It is our attempt to create an 'army' of fellow crusaders that will turn the tables and use Behavioural Design for collective progress in the world.

I am deeply concerned about the way the world is taking a turn right now. The consumerism sparked by corporates. The lack of privacy. The extreme right-winged political wave all over the world. The ecological destruction (let's not even call it climate change anymore, climate deniers please leave this website right now, you are not getting it). The lack of tolerance of people with a different race, colour, sexual preference or religion. The fearmongering. The lack of empathy and compassion for people even living close to us.

But there are answers to all these problems. The solutions can be found. I believe **we need another system of thinking and decision-making that is more human-focused and less shareholder-focused.**

We need an innovative approach to solving problems that puts empathy and compassion first. We need more people, like you and me, to get the tools to be successful. Not just the people in power or the filthy rich.
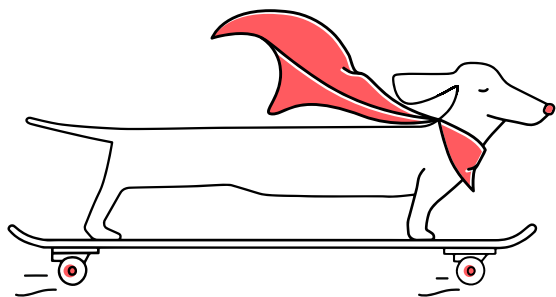
I believe that **Behavioural Design will give people the tools to gain more control over successful outcomes, which is vital to fight nationalism, fear and egocentrism.** Give people back control, you give him back self-worth, and you give them back the power to provide for themselves and their families. I think this shift in focus can start a grass-roots movement that will move things forward from the bottom up. The more people learn how to be more effective in changing behaviour, the faster we can accelerate coming up with solutions that spark positive behaviours. Of people, of communities, of teams, of organisations and nations. Our underlying objective is:

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More success for everyone.

By teaching people which forces drive behaviour. By giving them insight into how decision-making works. By showing how they can come up with products and services that people genuinely need and are willing to pay for over and over again. How they can help people make better, healthier, happier choices. How with the know-how of Behavioural Design, we can all gain more welfare: For ourselves, for the ones we love, for the planet, we live on.

This may sound too grand or too philanthropic for your taste, but don't leave this website just yet. SUE hasn't been founded for those who want to save the world as an out-set. We are here for those who want to learn how people can make better choices daily. For those who want to get better at creating and selling better products, services, and experiences. Those can be profitable, don't get me wrong. But they can start with a human (or should I say humane) frame in mind. You will know why and how people buy or buy in things. But you will also have insight into what products are unneeded or what will trigger undesirable behaviour.

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You can have the power to combine profits with better choices.

In doing so, you will help your business grow; you can provide stable income or jobs, create better living environments, promote healthy living and will help economies prosper. And very significantly: **Your satisfaction and pleasure of doing what you're doing will grow. You will start to experience success on different levels.**

I genuinely believe that all positive change starts with behaviour. And I also think change is not something we cannot control or cannot do ourselves. We can all take small steps, steps that in return, can be contagious because of their positive results. Steps that can spread like a friendly virus. **You just need the right recipe.**

And the recipe is Behavioural Design. Yuval Noah Harari wrote in his brilliant book **'Sapiens'**[7] that *'Millions of years of evolution have designed us to live and think as community members. Within a mere two centuries, we have become alienated individuals. Nothing testifies better to the awesome power of culture'.*

So, let's create a new culture. A human-centred culture. And let's get some sense of community back again while at the same time you're experiencing business and personal success. It can be done.

Our company's mission is to unlock the power of behavioural psychology to help people make better decisions in work, life, and play.

So, our take on Behavioural Design Ethics is for those people who will use Behavioural Design for the sake of good. If your intentions are no good, go away now.

We need people who are curious-minded and forward-thinking who want to solve wicked problems to embrace this knowledge.

If you're one of the right kind - and I bet you are - you'll find you'll not only use this front running know-how in your work, but you'll experience you will also start applying it to yourself.

The knowledge you'll gain can improve your personal life and living environment too.

That makes the SUE | Behavioural Design Method© priceless. You'll gain control of the superpowers of behavioural economics. Moreover, you can make them work for you, in more than one way.

Astrid Groenewegen

CO-FOUNDER SUE | BEHAVIOURAL DESIGN ACADEMY

[7] *Harari, Yaval Noah. (2015). Sapiens. A brief history of humankind. Harper.*

Want to learn more?

Suppose you want to learn more about how influence works. In that case, you might want to consider joining our **Behavioural Design Academy,** our officially accredited educational institution that already trained 2500+ people from 40+ countries in applied Behavioural Design. Or book an in-company program or workshop for your team. In our top-notch training, we teach the Behavioural Design Method© and the Influence Framework©. Two powerful frames to make behavioural change happen in practice.

You can also hire SUE to help you to bring an innovative perspective on your product, service, policy or marketing. In a **Behavioural Design Sprint,** we help you shape choice and desired behaviours using a mix of behavioural psychology and creativity.

You can **download the Academy brochure** here, **contact us** here or subscribe to Behavioural Design Digest at the bottom of this page. This is our weekly newsletter in which we deconstruct how influence works in work, life and society.

Or maybe, you're just curious about SUE | Behavioural Design. Here's where you can **read our backstory.**

Hope to see you soon!

SUE Behavioural Design