

Ethical principles for influencing & changing behaviour at scale

Five simplified ethical principles **for anyone involved in influencing and changing behaviour**. From policy makers to marketers, from advertisers to process designers. Sometimes influencing behaviour has the opposite effect. There are almost always side effects. Influencing behaviour is complex, with the risk that it is harmful to people and our society. These principles reduce the chance that you act unethically, or cause (unintentionally) negative mental and behavioural effects.

Influencing and moral deliberation >

Influence ethically?



How do you influence & change behaviour at scale ethically?

- ✓ Adhere to these **5 ethical principles**
- ✓ Follow the **law**, regulations & guidelines
- ✓ Use your **moral compass**

1. Responsibility



Take responsibility for your influence on other's behaviour

- Prevent and limit damage
- Prevent knowledge abuse
- Alert colleagues to ethical conduct

 **1. Responsibility >**

2. Integrity



Influence and change behaviour with integrity

- Be reliable in your actions
- Be open about your qualifications
- Prevent deception

 **2. Integrity >**

3. Respect



Influence with respect for the target group and the vulnerable within it

- Respect privacy
- Respect humanities restrictions
- Don't discriminate target groups

 **3. Respect >**

4. Expertise



Influence based on sufficient professional expertise

- Be informed of developments
- Ensure high quality
- Know your professional limits

 **4. Expertise >**

5. Data



Use lawful, reliable and valid data

- Respect privacy
- Assure reliable data
- Assure valid data

 **5. Data >**

These principles for acting ethically and with integrity in influencing behaviour have been developed by the Social & Economic Psychology (SEP) section. If you are a NIP member, the more extensive [professional code for academic psychologists and behavioural influencers](#) applies. For questions: sectiesep@psynip.nl.



1. Take responsibility for your influence on other's behaviour

a. Prevent and limit damage or negative side effects. Be aware that any side effects can occur with an intervention. Map these out as much as possible, and include them in a cost-benefit assessment. Damage or negative effects should be prevented as much as possible.

b. Prevent misuse of knowledge. Make sure that the knowledge collected (data, measured effects, reports and advice) cannot be misused. Also make an active effort to prevent others from using this knowledge maliciously (now and in the future).

c. Be alert to the performance and outcomes of colleagues. When influencing the behaviour of colleagues is not ethical or ethical, or if possible harmful consequences have not been sufficiently mapped out, or not or insufficiently or taken into account in the cost-benefit analysis, you draw their attention to this.

Responsible assignment

Reject an assignment if it could lead to damage or other negative effects that do not outweigh the benefits.



2. Influence integer

a. Make sure you are free to act with integrity.

You must be able to act independently, objectively and professionally, without being influenced by, for example, agreements, external pressure or power relations. Put it on the agenda immediately if you may not be able to ethically account for the effects of your actions.

b. Be open about your qualifications, knowledge, skills and resources. Indicate to clients what you can and cannot do at a professional level. When giving advice, give as much data and knowledge sources as possible from which you have drawn.

c. Avoid deception. Do not use techniques or data to entice clients, customers or other stakeholders to make decisions or engage in behaviour that they would not exhibit if they had been reasonably informed, circumspect and observant, or of which harmful effects are known to them.

Integer assignment

Reject an assignment if you cannot act objectively and professionally and/or people are being misled.



3. Influence with **respect** for the target group and the vulnerable within it

a. **Respect the privacy of the target group.**

Always assess when you penetrate the private life of the target group for reliable insights and influencing behaviour. Do not penetrate further into your private life than is necessary for the (respectful) assignment.

b. **Take into account the limitations of people in general and the vulnerable in particular.**

Take into account known unconscious pitfalls and biases, but also reading level, digital skills, ability to do, psycho-pathology and the like.

c. **Only distinguish between target groups insofar as relevant and justified for the (respectful) assignment.**

Consider, for example, discrimination based on race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation or on any other ground. Base your decision on legislation and regulations and your own moral compass.

Respectful assignment

Reject an assignment if privacy or vulnerabilities of the target group are unjustifiably invaded.



4. Influence based on sufficient expertise

a. Ensure a high quality of professional conduct.

Choose methods that are effective and efficient and take into account the limitations of those methods. If methods and techniques are insufficient for an expert intervention or answering the question, reformulate or reject the assignment.

b. Be aware of developments in the field. Keep your knowledge up-to-date by keeping up with developments in social and economic psychology as well as ethical discussions.

c. Know the limits of your personal competence, and of the field and act accordingly. Recognize the professional and personal limitations of your expertise and use only methods for which you are qualified through education, training or experience.

Expert assignment

Reject an assignment if you do not have the right knowledge and/or resources to complete the assignment expertly



5. Use lawful, reliable and valid data

a. Only work with lawfully obtained data and respect the (GDPR) legislation. Be aware of the law and act not only according to the letter, but also according to the spirit of the law ([see also this abbreviated explanation](#)). For example, make sure that permissions are given consciously, without obligation, informed and thoughtfully.

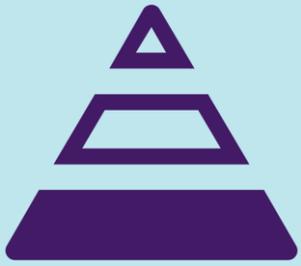
b. Know the reliability of your data and act accordingly. For example, report your confidence intervals, and be careful with conclusions and interventions based on research data with low numbers.

c. Know the validity of your data and act accordingly. Make sure your data sufficiently measures what you intend to measure, and be careful with less valid data. For example, draw less firm conclusions with self-reports than with direct behavioural measurements.

Report it if data is insufficiently reliable or valid.

Correct data use for an assignment

Reject an assignment if data does not comply with (GDPR) legislation, or is insufficiently reliable or valid.



Influencing behaviour



behavioural change is extremely complex. By influencing behaviour we mean all interventions, campaigns and choice architecture adjustments that are used to influence or change people's behaviour. Even the most educated and experienced psychologists cannot say for sure what effects the environment, an intervention or a message has on people. However, they do know a lot about the pitfalls, nuances, empirical support and statistical methods, which means that they can be of great value in behavioural issues and the development of interventions. Working with behaviour is also very popular. A lot of information about influencing behaviour can be found (for free) in many places these days and is consumed with interest by people from all (academic) backgrounds. We can only be enthusiastic about this interest, but we also want to guard against (unintended) unethical practices. That is why this document has been made for all people who are involved in influencing behaviour.

Not exhaustive. This manifesto offers principles, but is by no means comprehensive. For example, the influence is not permissible if it does not comply with the **law**, or if the **intention** is to cause harmful behaviour.

Moral compass & consultation

There will always be questions that this manifesto does not answer. In this case, you should use **your moral compass**, consult with colleagues and, if possible, academically trained behavioural influencers.

Moral deliberation

A moral deliberation is a **discussion about the moral or ethical aspects** of a practical situation. This can be useful when the principles are insufficient to assess a situation on ethical grounds. The button below leads to a suitable step-by-step plan for moral deliberation.

[Step-by-step plan for moral deliberation](#)

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