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HOW 'CARTOON
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The Science of Cartoon Thinking

Proving That Making People Laugh Can Transform the World

by Pat Byrnes

It may seem funny to consider cartoons as a business tool—until we look at the science behind what they do, not only in the individual mind, but in the collective consciousness.

I speak not only as a cartoonist for *The New Yorker* since 1998, with hundreds of cartoons published in their pages (of the many thousands more that weren't), but also from more than 40 years of applying the cartoonist's mindset to other creative careers, from advertising to comedy performance to working as an aerospace engineer on the design team for the stealth cruise missile.

There's something unique about *New Yorker* cartoons. They tell an entire story in a single image, with or without a caption. Known as "gag cartoons," a preeminent textbook on cartooning defines them as "the instant communication of a funny idea."¹ Notice: no reference to "picture" nor "words," but "communication" and "idea." Specifically, a funny idea.

Funny means more than "making you laugh." Funny also means "difficult to explain or understand" or "strange and not as you expect." **Explaining or understanding the difficult or unexpected lies at the heart of not only a good gag cartoon, but all innovation and culture change, particularly in human-centered areas, such as ethics compliance, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), policy, customer engagement, and team-building.**

Could the thinking, then, that goes into creating a gag cartoon benefit organizations seeking such transformations? Funny as it may sound, yes! The evidence comes from somewhere funnier still: neuroscience.

Inside our brains, regions associated with different cognitive and emotional functions work together in networks of various size and organization to perform higher-order thought processes. Transformational thought, including creativity, innovation, behavior change, and problem-solving, requires the synergetic, collaborative contributions of all three of the brain's large-scale neural networks:

the Executive Network, the Default Network, and the Salience Network.

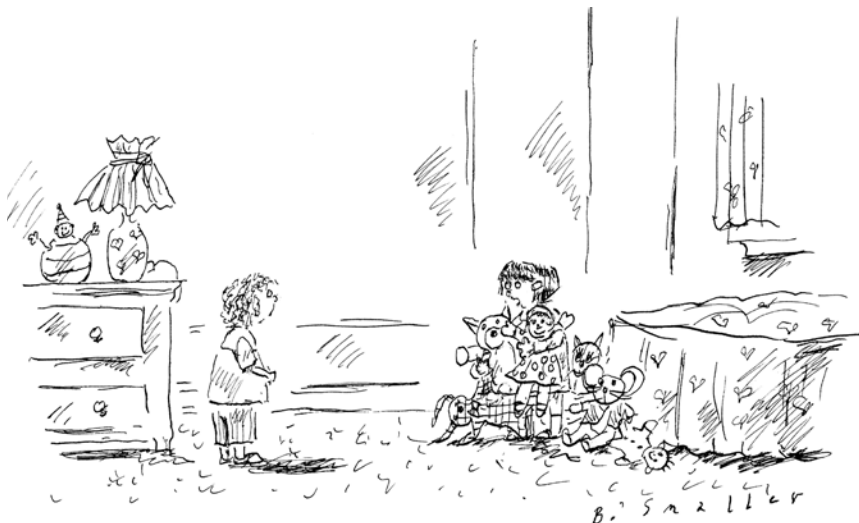
Let's look briefly at a partial inventory of what each network contributes to this transformational thinking process—and within that, why it is that a gag cartoon's inner workings significantly enhance the creativity surges within these intertwined systems.

■ **The Executive Network**

controls what its name implies, executive function. It lets us focus on goal-directed tasks and behaviors, such as planning and analysis. It also controls conflict resolution, rules-based problem solving, and decision making, including ethical judgment.

■ **The Default Network**

is so named because it is our brain's default mode. When the brain has no pressing business to attend to, it defaults to daydreaming. Our minds wander among bits and pieces



"I would share, but I'm not there developmentally."

"Not all creativity is humorous, but all humor is creative."

—Bob Mankoff

of memories we have tucked away and recombines them to envision possible futures, pasts, or presents—even impossible ones. It also supports pattern recognition, understanding the thoughts and emotions of others, and moral reasoning rooted in empathy.

■ **The Salience Network**

senses salient information and directs

our attention internally (Default Network) or externally (Executive Network) for the appropriate processing. But it is much more than a switching mechanism. It monitors our emotional responses, assesses risk versus reward, enables perspective-taking, and figures prominently in personal meaning-making processes, such as moral decisions.

The intended product of this inter-network collaboration² is, to distill it to a word, ideas. An idea is a thought that changes how we see. This internal restructuring or reframing of thought, typically sparked by an insight, enables us to adopt a new perception, outlook, or operating understanding.

One challenge we face with finding ideas is that the Default and Executive Networks, known respectively for divergent thinking and convergent thinking, typically do not play well with one another. When one turns on, the other turns off. Typically. But there are ways to work around that.

The tricky bit here is insight. An insight, or "aha" moment, cannot be achieved by step-by-step, rational thinking—precisely the kind of thinking we are most trained in. Insight is "the ability to draw together distantly related information" in "the sudden experience of comprehending something that you didn't understand before." Insights "arrive abruptly and in their entirety."³ That instantaneity demand does pose a challenge. But what makes it especially tricky is that it "happens when we are precisely not concentrating on it."⁴

Let us stop a moment to reflect on that. Picture yourself as a scientist, mining mountains of data and wracking your brain to find a reliable mechanism for producing insight—only to discover that success requires you to stop thinking about it.

Why, that sounds like a...

A what?

Precisely. A funny idea!



“More important, however, is what I learned about myself.”

ACCELERATING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL THOUGHT PROCESS

The misdirection of a gag cartoon's seeming simplicity allows us to "precisely not concentrate" on the larger, more serious issue at its core. Textbooks and presentations have long relied on them for communicating difficult topics, and the gag cartoon has consistently over-performed in generating insights for nearly a century.

Can people then use the underlying science of creativity to reverse engineer practicable mechanisms by which they can generate creative neural network connectivity by "precisely not concentrating on it" and apply that thinking to real-world situations in pursuit of genuine transformational thought and subsequent behavior? Even people without a rapier pen or razor wit?

Let us come upon the answer together by proceeding as a scientist, and dissecting the gag cartoon itself.

At first observation, the most obvious component of a gag cartoon is

Drawing; and what characterizes that Drawing is Humor. So we now examine Drawing and Humor.

The Drawing in a cartoon is the visualization of internal thought, or drawing from the mind's eye. It is symbolic representation, like a child's drawing or the X's and O's on a football coach's chalkboard, more caricature than literal. For thinking and communication purposes, we can also "draw" with physical gesture, pantomime, facial expression, or any other form of visual communication used to explain or explore concepts. Drawing directs our attention to our interior thoughts (to *focus* on what we are *daydreaming*).

In so doing, it co-activates the Default and Executive Networks—that thing that the brain does not ordinarily do!

"If I can't picture it, I don't understand it."

—Albert Einstein

Visualizing on a page—Drawing—captures emerging thoughts in fixed form and frees up our brain's working memory, which is essential to problem-solving. It also provide visual feedback to stimulate mental associations.

Then there's Humor. Humor is a term used broadly to describe entire genres of storytelling and other creative art

"Story reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it."

—Hannah Arendt

forms (including cartoons) that employ Humor as a signature device. For the purposes of isolating mechanisms that support transformational thought, we will use "Humor" to describe the device, rather than the genre. This narrows our scrutiny to the cognitive and emotional aspects distinct to Humor—the "funny" part of the idea, both the laugh-inducing and the "strange and not as you expect."

The Humor of a cartoon works somewhat like a puzzle to be solved. There is a conflict which we must detect (Salience Network) and resolve (Executive Network) almost instantly in order to reap the emotional rewards.

Dissecting our specimen further, however, we find that it contains a third organ, visceral, and therefore less obvious. Gag cartoons are more than funny pictures. They also tell a story, with a beginning, middle, and end, expressed in a single "decisive moment." To get the gag, we must intuit what came before this moment and what is likely to follow. We cross-map all of its informational cues with our personal knowledge, and empathize with each of its characters to discern motive and intent, and then put it all together to reveal what it means. To do that quickly, the story framework has to communicate quickly—instantly—as a trope, or Metaphor. Our connection to that

Metaphor—a desert island for loneliness, Noah's Ark for organizational pressures, a board room for any number of human conflicts—produces an understanding of one thing in terms of another.

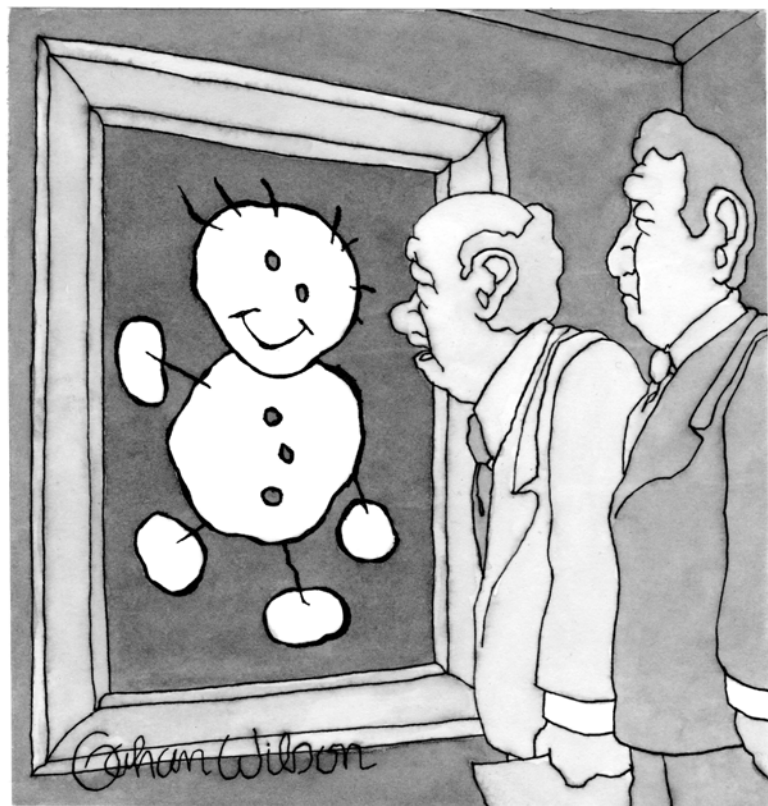
Logic cannot resolve the meaning of Metaphor. Understanding Metaphor requires a leap of insight, however small. The brain must make a connection between our lived experience and our system of affective values in a way that produces a new meaning. The parts of the brain that light up upon such a connection are situated in the Default and Salience Networks.

Now look at what we have done. Metaphor builds a bridge between the Default Network (the one that daydreams and envisions possibilities for the future) and the Salience Network (the one that restlessly seeks meaning in all that is going around and within us). We connect the Executive Network (the one that lets us focus on getting things done) with the Default Network by the act of Drawing. And the sensemaking

process of Humor, which reassesses and verifies the implications of that Drawn Metaphor, links the Salience Network with the Executive Network.

Drawing, Humor, and Metaphor each generate functional connectivity between concatenated pairs of networks: Drawing lets us *focus* on what we are *daydreaming*, Metaphor leads *daydreaming* to *meaning*, and Humor brings *meaning* into *focus*.⁵ By doing all three together—under the guise of coming up with a cartoon—we integrate those pairings into a single whole-brain process that is more than the sum of its parts.

It begins with the simple act of putting our pencil to paper. This immediately unlocks our imagination. A lack of traditional drawing skills is no obstacle. The simple, physical act of imperfectly visualizing what's in our mind's eye⁶ prompts evolving associations and interpretations of the marks we leave on the page. This has been the genius



"Of course, it's a very early Rembrandt."

of cartoon drawing since Leonardo da Vinci got his first sketchbook.

Cartoon drawing is thinking.

CARTOON THINKING

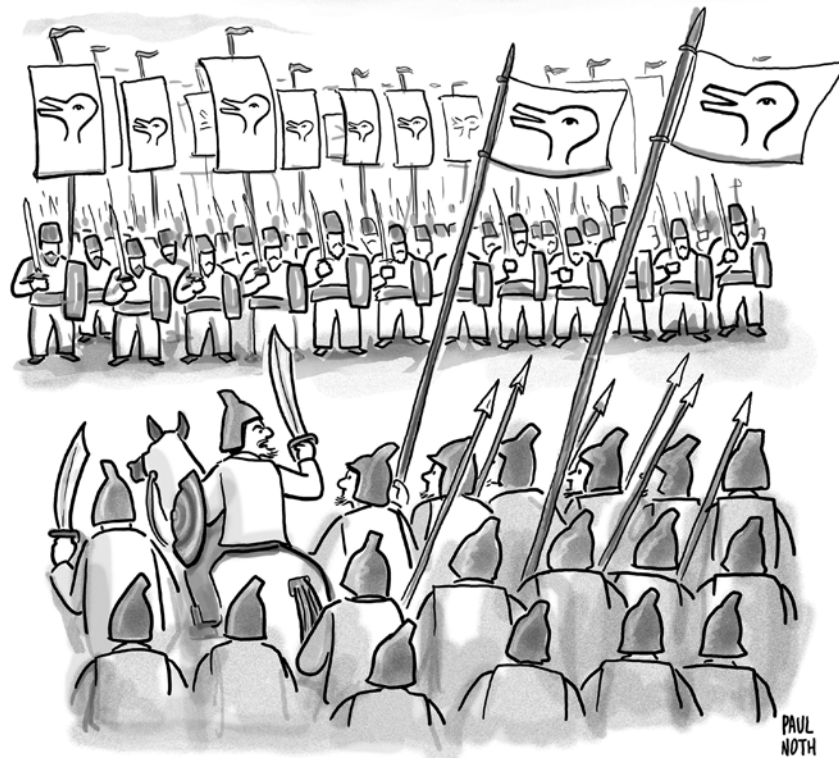
A blank sheet of paper cues the brain: Possibility! The marks we make spontaneously trigger those “distant connections” in our associative memory, as if we were interpreting clouds or Rorschach ink blots. We also take advantage of our brains’ talent for predicting what else is in the picture, particularly out in the periphery. Our eyes can only focus on a tiny part of our field of vision, and how our minds interpret what else we see is powerfully influenced by whatever unconscious preoccupations we hold at the time. This nudges our thoughts toward analogy and Metaphor. That sudden reframing of thought, particularly in a medium already associated with fun, tends to encourage playfulness. And Humor. Humor then primes us to toy further with our expectations, pushing our brains to consider new, more unexpected possibilities in its predictions. And around it goes again, building on itself.

When we visually reframe issues as a source of amusement, we get better at finding what we need to change and how we ourselves need to adapt to that change.

Referring again to the diagram, interconnecting the three networks of Executive, Default and Salience is not a linear process. One might even call it “loopy.” Multiple circuits and multiple simultaneous streams flow—intertwine, intersect, connect, and collide—in whichever serendipitous direction, building in energy, accelerating thought, until it creates a spark. A connection. An insight.

This is what we call cartoon thinking.

The lens of Humor both expands and sharpens our ability to spot hidden risks and rewards. This advantage is magnified by working visually, because Drawing improves problem-solving as well as problem-sensing—for both analytical and creative problems. In addition to its



“There can be no peace until they renounce their Rabbit God and accept our Duck God.”

associative powers, it also moderates anxiety, while increasing empathy.

Drawing characters, even symbolic or anthropomorphic ones, intensifies this connection. Metaphor deepens empathic engagement further by opening us to fresh perspectives. Humor supports Metaphor by boosting our sensitivity to potential insights. Humor also tricks our risk detection centers into reframing scary stimuli as instead having positive reward potential, which then makes us likelier to detect useful associations while Drawing. And around we go yet again! Humorous visual metaphor creates a virtuous cycle, a dynamo for transformational thought.

Cartoon thinking makes these benefits accessible to anyone not traditionally regarded as a “creative.” It takes only pencil, paper, and a willingness to play. It can be done privately at a

desk—while providing the outward appearance of “serious” business.

It can also support teams. The creative thinking potential of any individual or team draws from knowledge and experience, the more diverse the better. Collaboration that is inclusive of those who have been traditionally marginalized can produce richer and more divergent associations, contributing to more not-as-you-expect ideas, which is how innovation happens. Diverse, even competing individual interpretations of the group product, meanwhile, are received as non-threatening to others in the group by the fact that everybody can see that everybody else is literally and figuratively on the same page.

Cartoon thinking doesn't simply expand our awareness of and connection to alternative perspectives and help us to empathize with them, it lets us see

how those perspectives make sense in ways that are emotionally less intimidating and easier to accept.

This collaborative cartoon thinking approach to discovery, through a dynamic process unfolding “outside the box” and yet in the fixed medium of paper or a screen, respects each participant’s agency and accommodates the absorption of change at a self-regulated rate, even with uncomfortable or aversive topics.

Like business ethics.

HOW CARTOON THINKING FLIPPED THE SCRIPT ON BUSINESS ETHICS TRAINING

Business ethics compliance not only saves companies legal costs and damage to their reputation, it is affirmatively good for business. Ethical cultures lead to higher employee satisfaction and retention, better innovation, and more productive teams. Which happens to be attractive to customers. Companies named among the World’s Most Ethical Companies “outperformed a comparable index of large cap companies by 13.6 percentage points from January 2018 to January

2023,”⁷ according to Ethisphere’s Ethics Index. Ethics and compliance is a good for the bottom line.

So why do compliance officers so often feel like the bad guy around the office? That was the challenge The Drawing Board was recruited to address during the 2022 Global Ethics Summit. Our mission was to help several dozen senior compliance officers from Fortune 100 companies and other large organizations to rethink their messaging around compliance issues like anti-corruption, culture, and conflicts of interest. After some introductory exercises to orient them to playful visual reframing (a.k.a. Humor + Drawing + Metaphor), we turned to their problem. Promoting the rules of right behavior was fostering reactance. So, what if, we asked them, they modeled the opposite approach? Do it wrong. On purpose.

But within the safe confines of a cartoon.

We gave them a manipulable digital template (think paper dolls) to construct cartoon analogs of their Do It Wrong messaging. By reimagining the nature these conflicts in nonliteral environments—a desert island, an enchanted forest, a funeral home—with

the presumptive goal of encouraging mishaps, they began to laugh. That immediately lowered the emotional

“One of the attractions of drawing is that it lends itself easily to metaphor.”

—Quentin Blake

barrier to speaking candidly about what experiences and feelings were behind that laughter. Insights emerged. They found the “aha” in the “haha.”

They saw how much easier it was to understand the consequences of bad compliance choices by having the chance to feel them for themselves. Seeing the way that everybody in the group laughed and opened up together showed them a welcome alternative to the routine resentment that typically meets lectures about rules and policies. They saw how much more effective it would be to let the employees come to their own realizations in the same uplifting spirit. Compliance officers didn’t have to be the feared “internal affairs cops” if, instead of hammering rules and policies, they could promote compliance through compassion instead of compulsion.

The insights from this experience didn’t just inform their own understanding. Ethisphere, the conference host, tapped several of those insights to inform professionally drawn cartoons, to be included in its growing library of Ethitoons™, a popular feature of manager toolkits they produce for internal compliance training.

Seeing the relationships, understanding them from a different perspective, and being able to laugh about it: that’s what transformative thought is about. And transforming thought— and feeling—is the key to transforming behavior. That is why cartooning is such an effective



“What’s our policy on honesty?”

ABOUT ETHITOONS

As part of its work to help companies foster strong ethical cultures within their organizations, Ethisphere develops toolkits and communications focused on specific roles (e.g., managers) and specific topics (e.g., conflicts of interest, non-retaliation, etc.). Included in these kits are cartoons—**EthiToons**—that are designed for managers to use in team meetings to spark conversations about the importance of ethics and to highlight specific ethics and compliance issues.

EthiToons can be used in a number of ways, including:



- **Ethics Weeks:** For dedicated ethics initiatives, EthiToons are featured in presentations, team meetings and other forums as a way to get employees thinking about ethics.

- **Manager ethics and compliance discussions:** To keep ethics and compliance top of mind among employees, managers may use an EthiToon to spark discussions about a specific topic.
- **Employee engagement:** General communications modules such as articles, posters, agendas, can use EthiToons to deliver a big message in a very short amount of time.
- **Icebreakers:** Team meetings, CEO townhalls and other gatherings can showcase EthiToons to warm up an audience, or to pique interest in the importance of ethics.

To learn more about EthiToons, please click [here](#).

method for getting people to think differently about ethics, compliance, integrity, and culture. And, how the art and craft of wielding humor as a means to bring people together can work in ways that no other form of outreach can.

Companies know that a better ethical culture is good for profits, as is diversity, equity, and inclusion. Policy makers know the data that support their positions. Leaders of every kind of organization know that a more adaptive, resilient, and innovative culture is critical to its success. But, like insight, those goals cannot be achieved through brute logic or by forcing behaviors. There's no formula. The people within the culture those leaders hope to change must feel the change within themselves, based on their values, their lived experience. Change must be their idea. The realization of the need to change and the mechanisms for how to do it must arise in each individual heart. People have to "get it."

How do you make them get it? Ask a cartoonist. It's what they do. ■

ABOUT THE EXPERT

Pat Byrnes is a founder and the executive creative director at *The Drawing Board*, a business consultancy that teaches cartoon

thinking for innovation, communication, diversity, and ethics. He has been a cartoonist for The New Yorker since 1998 and is a Best Gag Cartoonist winner in the National Cartoonist Society's Reuben Awards. He draws on more than 40 years of professional creative experience, as a syndicated cartoonist, illustrator, inventor, author, voice actor, stage comic, ad copywriter, and aerospace engineer.

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For a selected bibliography for this article, please [click here](#).

REFERENCES

1. Gerber, 1989
2. Various other systems in the brain (the limbic system, mesolimbic system, mirror neuron system, and others) feed into or

operate within this three-network model and make multiple contributions to its overall function. They act as agents and serve as mechanisms within the integrative model we propose. Discussing them separately adds an unnecessary layer of complexity for our purposes, which is to develop a practical tool for promoting transformative change. The simplified model of the three-large-scale-neural networks provides a workable framework that is head-scratching enough

3. Kounios and Beeman (2015)
4. McGilchrist (2009)
5. *Humor is complex, and the study of it is often contradictory (fittingly, I would say). In its fuller embodiment, it engages all 5 three large-scale networks, and more. Still, what it contributes most usefully to the cartoon process (without making a book of this) involves the reassessment and reward aspects of "funny." The diagram nevertheless acknowledges the Default Network's involvement in processing Humor's surprise via the open manhole cover of the O in HUMOR.*
6. *This includes the mind's eye of even the visually impaired, due to the haptic, spatial, relational, and emotional aspects, 6 among others, of mental visualization. Kim et al (2021); Sacks (2010); Tversky (2019)*
7. <https://ethisphere.com/what-we-do/worlds-most-ethical-companies/>