

Using Comic Art to Illustrate, Define and Debate Various and Nefarious Business Phenomenon: A Classroom Instructional Project

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript suggests that comic art or cartoons can be used for illustrating, depicting, skewering, or even satirizing ethical, unethical, and other practices associated with business decision-making. As a classroom instructional project, the approach presents arguments for why cartooning is a useful tool for business, education, and the arts. Cartooning can improve decision making by fostering creativity and generating more relevant and meaningful solutions to the problem. It is posited that artful cartooning will be of value to management decision makers when used as a tool to explain funny, difficult and/or heretofore inexplicable and puzzling phenomenon encountered both within the confines of the business world and beyond.

Keywords: Comic art, satire, business practices.



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Introduction

Herein is proposed the use of artful comics as a tool for illustrating, depicting, skewering or even satirizing various and sundry ethical, unethical and just plain puzzling, modern management decision-making. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 demonstrates the use of cartoons and explains how and why cartooning is useful in business, education, and the arts. Section 3 reviews the academic literature on the use of comics as a teaching strategy. Section 4 enumerates steps for creating a meaningful cartoon to illustrate and resolve ethical or puzzling business phenomenon and includes examples of cartoons that illustrate ethical or unethical business practices. Section 5 concludes by showing how meaningful and impactful cartoons may address ethical quandaries.

The use of cartoons in business.

In a recent Journal of Business Research special issue call for papers on the arts, the editors make several points that are supportive of the use of comic art. They write:

Nowadays organizations benefit from being agile, intuitive, imaginative, flexible to change, and innovative to meet the complexity and turbulence of the new business age. Employees need to engage, energize, and inspire so that they can exercise their feelings in everyday working activities and operate as innovative and transformational agents. (Schiuma & Carlucci, 2015)

The comic art that is proposed would operate in a manner that is innovative and transformational. Using Scott Adams' *Dilbert Principle* (1996) as a guide, it is apparent that Adams is a cartoonist who fulfills many of the Schiuma and Carlucci directives. Adams, through his characters Dilbert and friends, "exercises his feelings in everyday working activities" that almost all workers can understand. In fact, the book, *The Dilbert Principle*, contains chapters on such similar or peripheral topics as called for by the special issue editors as:

- Change
- Machiavellian methods
- Employee strategies
- How to tell if your company is doomed
- Downsizing
- Leadership.

As is typical in a cartoon, the "transformational agent" is more direct and focused. For example, the chapter on "downsizing" contains the following exchange. The chapter opens with "the boss" telling a knock-knock joke. He asks, "Knock-knock?"

The employee responds, "Who's there?"

The answer is, "Not you anymore" (Adams, 1994, p. 244).

The point is that cartoon construction may be especially useful when applied to various business practices as a way for employees to draw attention to these practices. The illustrations may be somewhat satirical, but they also may be therapeutic. They may be satirical in that many workers like to joke about themselves, their supervisor, their colleagues and/or their employer. Of course, such joking should be done diplomatically. They are therapeutic because the process itself of constructing the cartoon can be liberating. The psychotherapist Susan Buchalter explains how in her book, *A Practical Art Therapy* (2004).

Clients are encouraged to depict a story through a cartoon... Clients are given a forum to express their issues and concerns; creating a cartoon makes the client feel more relaxed and more willing to express ideas. Serious concerns often materialize in the artwork as a seemingly silly cartoon is explored.

(Buchalter, 2004, p. 74.)

These “serious concerns” can then be explored with the psychotherapist in the same manner that business cartoons may be shared with colleagues. Yes, they are mere illustrations, but do they depict any important and underlying themes? Would some colleagues like to comment on these themes and can a further discussion lead to a constructive resolution of the issues on display? Perhaps a bulletin board can be used in the breakroom to allow posters to anonymously tack up the various comical illustrations of the company’s current strategies, policies, and procedures and to spark more serious consideration about the organization’s moves going forward. If these considerations can lead to meaningful discussions, then the comical illustrations will have served their purpose.

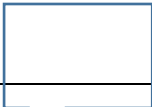


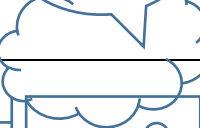
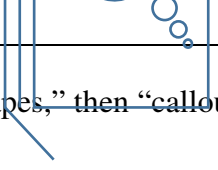
Lastly, cartoon construction can be educational. Illustrations have been used in the form of “wuzzle-picture-puzzles” to enable working adults to master various terms associated with a basic business and organizational behavior course. In one example, students used the Microsoft clipart library to insert an emperor in a cave. A young man walks by and claims, “That’s strange. It looks like the cave ate the emperor.” A small bird warns, “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you!” The illustration is designed to trigger a picture associated with the word, “Caveat emptor” (Dunphy, 2016).

A similar illustration is made of a man jumping over a toll turnstile in order to avoid paying his fare. A police officer asks, “Is the fare-jumper too lazy to pay his fare?” The picture association is designed to illustrate the French term, “laissez fare.”

Both examples are useful for mastering the textbook’s terminology. The instructor or corporate trainer can identify words taken from the business ethics literature such as ‘*caveat emptor*’ or ‘*laissez fare*’ which are regularly misused, misunderstood and misapplied and then have the students construct wuzzle-picture-puzzles of those terms. These puzzles can be shared with the class or used as study guides for each student. The author’s experience has been that the construction of these wuzzle-picture-puzzles significantly increases retention and understanding of the terms.

The comics are “artful” in that they incorporate “clip-art” from any of the Internet’s clipart libraries. The author suggests using royalty-free clipart from such sites as “bing.com” which are available in MS-word by clicking “insert” then “online pictures” and combining the pictures with various callouts accessible by clicking “insert,” “shapes,” and then “callouts.” Table 1 includes a listing of the callout and their explanations for usage. Of course, actual cartoonists will create their own callouts and characterization. Because they have the time and talent to draw their own cartoons, they should be recognized as true artists and lauded as such (Spurgeon, 2016).

Table 1: MS Word’s Basic Callouts

Type of callout	Example	Used for:
1. Rectangular		Used as a text container with sharp emphasis.
2. Rounded		Used as a text container with reduced emphasis.
3. Oval		Used as a text container with softer emphasis.
4. Cloud		Allows the character to express his or her thoughts.
5. Line		Used as a different style of text container.

Note: In MS Word, click “insert,” “shapes,” then “callouts.”

Review of the academic literature on using comic art as a management teaching strategy.

A review of the literature reveals "The comics as a teaching strategy in learning of students in an undergraduate management program" by Da Silva et. al. (2017). Da Silva and his coauthors report that “using presentations of comics as a teaching strategy can enhance competence development, assist in the development of innovation and flexibility, and also contribute to reducing the gap between theory and practice” (p. 41). Such an experience seems to be appreciated by its participants. Kilickaya and Krajka (2012) found that 24 of the 25 students who created comics to enhance learning “claimed they liked to participate in the activity” (p. 48). In the end, Da Silva claims that his comics' exercise “develops critical thinking, helps to establish relationships between events and managerial situations and encourages the exchange of experiences, assisting in decision-making and allowing the students to represent a professional situation based on theoretical precepts” (p. 59), but offers no statistical proof supporting these claims.

Another important study examines “X-men ethics” by “Using comic books to teach business ethics” (Gerde and Foster, 2007). The authors found comic books to be of value for illustrating “the universality of virtues and ethical dilemmas” (p. 249). The main topics used for illustration were:

- Business ethics
- Leadership
- Diversity and teamwork
- Marketing
- Business and government
- Internationalization.

- Technology
- Postmodernism and business.

The authors conclude that X-men comic books, although a mature literary form, spin modern narratives enabling educators “to discuss ethical decision-making and the social issues impacting management today” (p. 254).

Instead of X-men, the researcher Russell Belk focused on classic cartoon characters in his content analysis of comic books featuring themes of wealth. His conclusions showed “ambivalence” regarding the treatment of these themes, and his study’s character selections show why. They are, “the Fox and Crow,” “Veronica Lodge,” “Uncle Scrooge McDuck,” and “Richie Rich” (Belk, 1987). These characters are not known for their substantive contemplation of themes of wealth, so perhaps it is not surprising that Dr. Belk’s content analysis showed that there was not much “*content*” there.

Sean Carleton focuses on comics with “politically progressive content,” and attempts to illustrate how such content can develop “conscientization” and “activist learning” (Carleton, 2014, p. 153). Carleton cites several works by Howard Zinn including Zinn’s graphical adaptation of “A People’s History of the American Empire” (2008). The cited and graphically illustrated example along with most of the other citations does raise awareness of societal, political, and economic contradictions, but some of the illustrations strain credulity. For example, from the comic book “The 500 Years of Resistance” (Hill, 2010) comes a crucifix-laden conquistador. He is depicted chopping off a woman’s hand after already slicing off her nose. In the foreground, another conquistador hangs four of her tribesmen. Another conquistador is raping a tribeswoman while the rest of the village is being pillaged. This is a somewhat difficult scene to cognitively process even though the illustration uses a comic or graphical form and despite the fact that these events are historically accurate.

An effort to create content that may have an impact is evident in the comic, “Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four in Hard Choices.” A review in “Comic is a teaching tool: Superheroes speak out against drugs and alcohol” by reporter Angela Chambers (2007) explains that the hard choice’s comic resulted from a joint effort between Marvel’s business development division and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks of the United States of America. The Elks national drug awareness program distributes the comics to schools nationwide. The accompanying guide enables teachers to lead students in a discussion about how “Franklin,” son of Fantastic Four parents Sue and Reed Richards, can withstand “big boy” pressure to drink alcohol or abuse drugs. Herman Roesler, the Dallas Elks Lodge Drug Awareness Chairman, claims that this “special issue” comic has a “strong impact” since the comic’s characters are “well known.” Chamber’s review notes that son Franklin concludes, “If I’ve learned anything from my Superhero parents, it’s that making the right choices isn’t always easy, but in the end, it’s always worth it” (Chambers, 2007, p. 3B).

Another focused use of cartoons to teach specific concepts is detailed in “Using cartoons to transfer knowledge concerning the principles of work disability prevention among stakeholders” (Labrecque et. al., 2016). In this study, the authors tested the use of cartoons “to transfer knowledge concerning the principles of work disability prevention among stakeholders.” The authors found that the cartoons they used on groups of work disability stakeholders were “useful for knowledge transfer.” The inexperienced and experienced stakeholders were able to identify between 61 and 79% of the principles presented depending on if the stakeholder group was “inexperienced” or “experienced.” Participants in the study found the cartoons to be “rich in ideas and simple to understand” (p. 141).

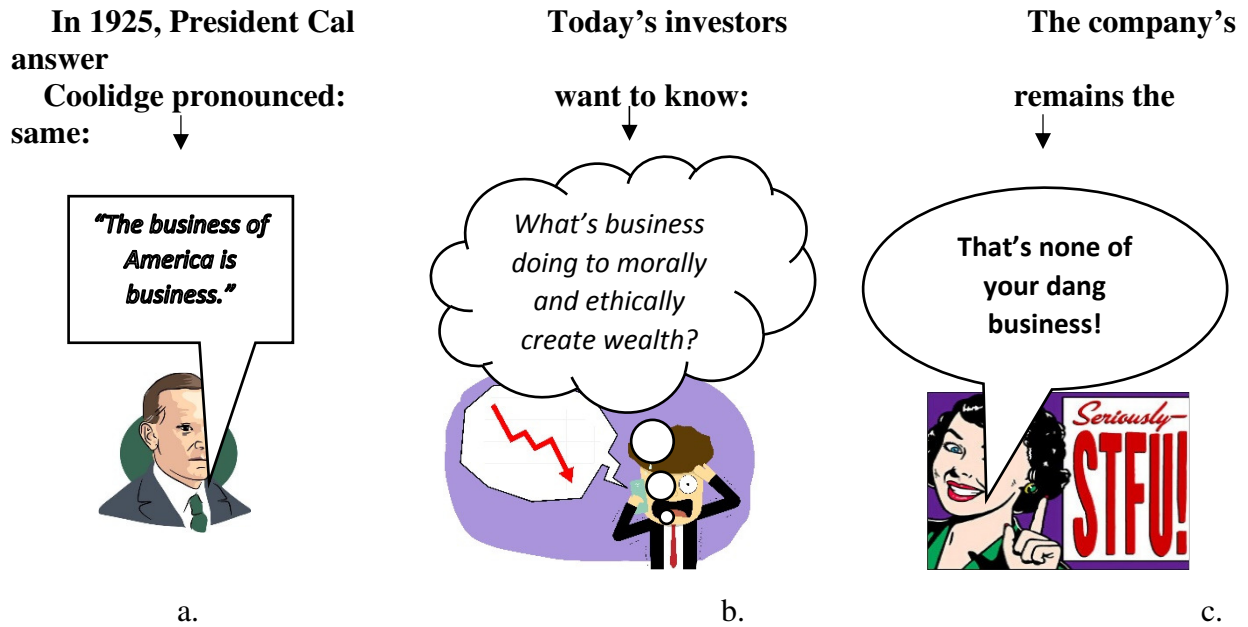
An operationalization of how to process meaningful content is provided by Slocum et. al. (2014) in “Teaching business ethics through strategically integrated micro-insertions.” The authors define micro-insertions as “small-scale insertions of ethics instructions.” They illustrate these insertions with a cartoon, a film clip and a mini case. The authors misspell the title of the film they recommend. It is not “Glen Garry, Glen Ross;” it is “Glengarry Glen Ross” and is named to evoke the Scottish Highlands through the imagery of the “Glengarry bonnet.” Additionally, there is a misattribution of the product. The authors assert that a film clip of ‘Glen Garry Glen Ross’ can be used to demonstrate the topic of motivation since they claim that the clip shows “a very impactful meeting going on to demand that these employees sell more insurance at any cost” (p. 53). Actually, no insurance is sold at any cost in the movie. The employees are selling or trying to sell real estate and hope to win an Alec Baldwin constructed real estate sales contest by obtaining the new leads, “The Glengarry leads.” Still, despite this misattribution of the product, the authors’ suggestion of “micro-insertions” for teaching business ethics has merit, especially when used with cartoons since comic depictions allow a quick and easy way to integrate ethics-oriented topics into teaching.

Creating meaningful cartoons.

Most cartoonists who write about how they engage in their craft suggest it starts with a meaningful idea (Larson, 1985; Simpson, 2007). This idea might include a play on words, a punchline, a message, or a set of points the cartoonist wishes to illustrate. The next step involves sketching out a story on a “storyboard” or simply a piece of paper. How many panels will be used? Many publications limit the number of panels to four. Then the comic is laid out. Various panels are designed to capture certain scenes and specific snippets of dialogue. Since comics are sequential art, the cartoonist must think about sequencing the story in such a manner as to draw in his or her readers. Finally, the comic is drawn and refined. With the improvements in desktop publishing, this may simply involve copying and pasting various pieces of clipart and callouts from the publishing software. Hopefully, the pictures and dialogue build to something that proves to be communicative and rich in meaning for both the reader and the cartoonist (Cheng, 2012).

Several examples of artful cartoons created to illustrate the textbook’s conceptual material follow.

Figure 1: America “gives us the business.”



- a. Hudson, D. 2008. "Calvin Coolidge illustration," Copyright 2014 by Shutterstock.com and reprinted with permission. Royalty-free stock illustration ID: 19344268. Retrieved on February 23, 2020 (<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/calvin-coolidge-19344268>).
- b. Mojojo, M. 2012. "Panic businessman." Copyright 2017 by Shutterstock.com and reprinted with permission. Royalty-free stock images ID: 1090075706 Retrieved on February 19, 2020 (<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/panic-businessman-smartphone-stock-market-vector-1090075706>).
- c. Skullhowzer. 2015. "Seriously, STFU!" Permission granted from Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License images ID: 2379. Retrieved on February 19, 2020 (<https://gamebanana.com/sprays/2379>).

The management issue? Social responsibility.

Drawn based on which chapter or section of the textbook? Chapter 2, "Ethics and Social Responsibility in Business."

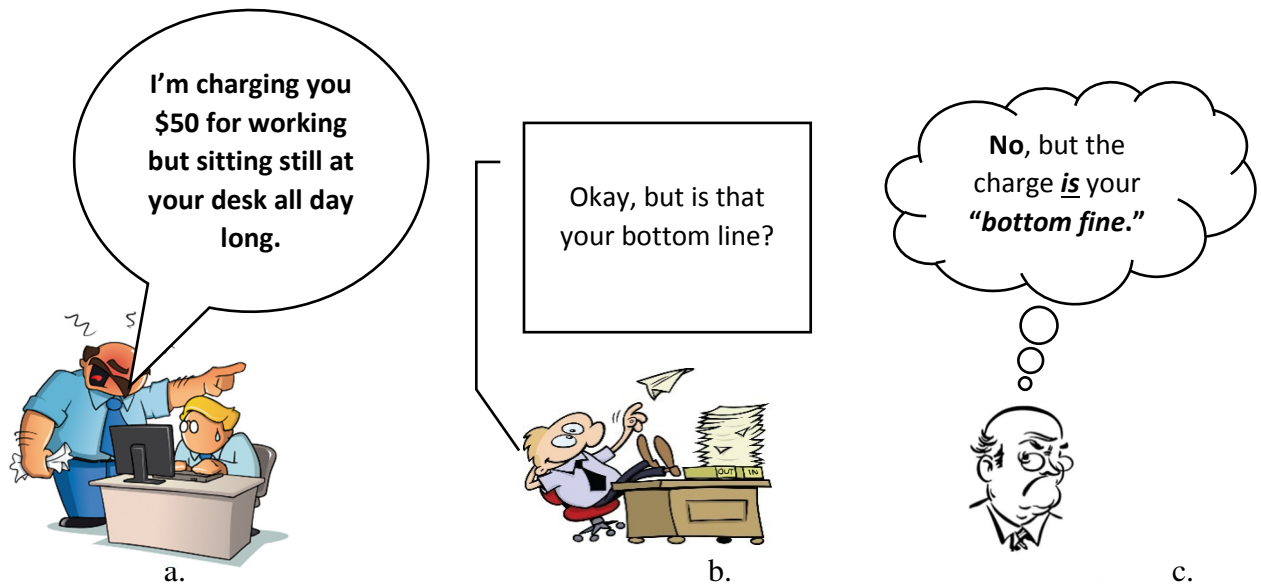
The debate? Should stakeholders insist that companies commit to a socially responsive course of action? Monies diverted to CSR activities could have been expended on more direct contributions to overall financial performance, thus the so called "opportunity cost" of moving CSR expenditures to expenditures that improve financial performance remains unaccounted for. Companies may wish to avoid disclosure in order to protect trade secrets.

The student's resolution? A balance must be sought between the corporation's mission to create wealth and society's needs to preserve and sustain the environment.

In the first example, students are challenged to consider and evaluate the reporting relationships and disclosure requirements of corporations as necessitated by the Sarbanes-Oxley

Act in the United States and/or E.U. reporting requirements in Europe and Asia. Is it or isn't it true that not only investors but also the public wants to know how and why corporations are creating sustainable wealth? Why do so many companies obfuscate or even refuse to answer disclosure queries and what can be done to balance the need for disclosure with this preference of most corporations to protect and defend privacy rights and corporate secrets?

Figure 2: *The Company announces a new HR Policy.*



a. Cramm, G. 2013. "An angry boss yelling at his employee from behind a desk." Adapted from royalty free images, Copyright 2015 by Shutterstock.com and reprinted with permission. Retrieved on March 7, 2020 (<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-vector/angry-boss-yelling-his-employee-behind-76240591>).

b. Gnurf, C. 2015. "Lazy toon guy throwing a paper airplane." Copyright 2017 by ClipartOf.com and reprinted with permission. Retrieved on March 11, 2020 (https://www.clipartof.com/download?download_id=fda0597ebbaafdd196495f19c81d27e).

c. Vector Artist. 2009. "Head Honcho." Adapted from royalty free images, Copyright 2012 by Shutterstock.com and reprinted with permission. Retrieved on March 12, 2020 (https://www.shutterstock.com/search/Head+Honcho?image_type=vector).

The management issues? Employee health and welfare, physical fitness, excessive sedentary behavior.

Drawn based on which chapter or section of the textbook? Chapter 9, "Human resource management: Attracting and Retaining the Best Employees."

The debate? It remains unclear how intrusive human resources should be regarding the health and welfare of employees. It would appear that most office workers are not supplementing their sedentary work life with a proper diet and vigorous exercise. Should co-workers and those who are fit encourage others to get up and move? Should some sort of penalty be imposed to those who ignore the warnings?

The student's resolution? Perhaps a discussion might ensue regarding the sedentary behavior of most office workers. Could a break time be instituted which contains more than a trip to the office coffee pot or vending machine? Why couldn't this break time include 15 minutes of directed calisthenics?

The second figure is designed to spark meaningful discussion about HR's efforts to ensure employee health and welfare. Modern office workers seem to sit for extended periods staring and allegedly interacting with their computer screens. In so doing, they may operationalize the organization's business but retard their body's functions. Historically, worker rates of obesity, heart disease, suicide, and general malaise have been rising (Khazan, 2014). Should companies and their human resources departments attempt to intervene, or should the "hands-off" approach prevail?

In the debrief, students can be asked to provide their own punchlines and their responses can serve as springboards for their own comic creations. In so doing, and by presenting and discussing their comic creations, the class will be transformed from a passive lecture and chapter exercise class on business ethics to an active and engaged participation vehicle for the analysis, synthesis and inclusion of ethical issues and possible implementation of real-world solutions into organizational life.

The point is that cartooning provides a visual exercise for the cartoonist and his or her readers to create an expressive message. Visual learners will be especially appreciative of this medium specifically devoted to their learning style.

Conclusion

Complex, funny, and meaningful ideas can be communicated via cartooning. The opportunity for self-expression, satire, and humor can easily evolve into something much more. In the hands of a skilled cartoonist, the artistic pictures combined with meaningful dialogue might be a catalyst for real change in corporate strategy, employee interpersonal relationships, or even interactions between race, ethnicities, and nations.

Several academics such as Schiuma and Carlucci have called for recognition of "The arts as sources of value creation for business" and "aim(s) to examine models, approaches, methods (and) tools . . . to explicate the role and relevance of the arts as a value driver in private and public organizations" (2015). This manuscript shows that one form of art, comic illustrations, or cartoons, may be an overlooked tool which can fulfill their potential as a value driver. Their use may serve as an effective vehicle for driving important encapsulated messages to heretofore-unreached constituencies. Lastly, when constructed properly and artfully, comic illustrations might even serve as an effective way to master textbook terminology and conceptual material.

To test this claim, a hypothesis could be developed asserting that the learning exercise requiring students to construct comic illustrations of ethical or unethical business practices and other conceptual textbook material associated with management might be superior to traditional lecture and end-of-chapter exercises in terms of enabling students to master such terms as "caveat emptor," "laissez fair," "due diligence" and "fiduciary duty" and in terms of developing an understanding of the concepts associated with these terms. The point is that the use of comic illustrations as "micro-insertions" (Slocum et.al, 2014) can spark meaningful analysis of the ethical, unethical, or just plain puzzling situation associated with management decision making.

Students may be more motivated and inspired to debate and resolve the ethical situation since they are the ones who created the illustration under review. The development of such a hypothesis, the collection of data and the testing of this proposition might result in a valuable contribution to the understanding of the use and impact of comic art as a teaching tool. Unfortunately, the author retired from the academy. Hence, the actual testing of this hypothesis including the implementation of the exercise in the classroom, the data collection of a statistically significant number of observations, and the data analysis and interpretation of the results assessing the pedagogical impact of comic art is suggested for others as “future research.”

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Appendix: Directions to Students

The task: Draw two comics or cartoons using several panels that illustrate two different business issues from your textbook. Each cartoon or comic illustration will be worth 10% of your final grade (for 20% total).

You may scan the word glossary at the back of each chapter of your text or simply read the text and then relate it to something of interest that may involve an ethical dilemma, a strange situation or a funny occurrence. The cartoon or comic illustration does not have to be funny, nor does it have to be a visual masterpiece. It should merely illustrate, define, or present in an alternative way a vocabulary word, concept or ethical dilemma as noted in any chapter of your textbook. Please use royalty free or free use clip art wherever possible by using bing.com, flicker or other sites and indicate the source of the clipart.

Include, at the bottom of your cartoon or comic illustration:

- 1. The management issue that you are attempting to depict.**
- 2. An explanation specifying the chapter from which the drawing is based upon.**
- 3. An identification of what debate or discussion the depiction is supposed to foster.**
- 4. A synthesis of the issue providing a suggested resolution of the discussion.**

It would help to base your arguments based on findings in the relevant literature and the impact of these findings on your personal understanding, synthesis and resolution of the issue. Please use footnotes and/or references to document your stipulations. Can you find any scientific studies in support of your position or of the implied position suggested by the figures in your cartoon? Additionally, please note that every publication contains certain biases and points of view imbedded in the author's psyche. Can you identify this point of view?

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