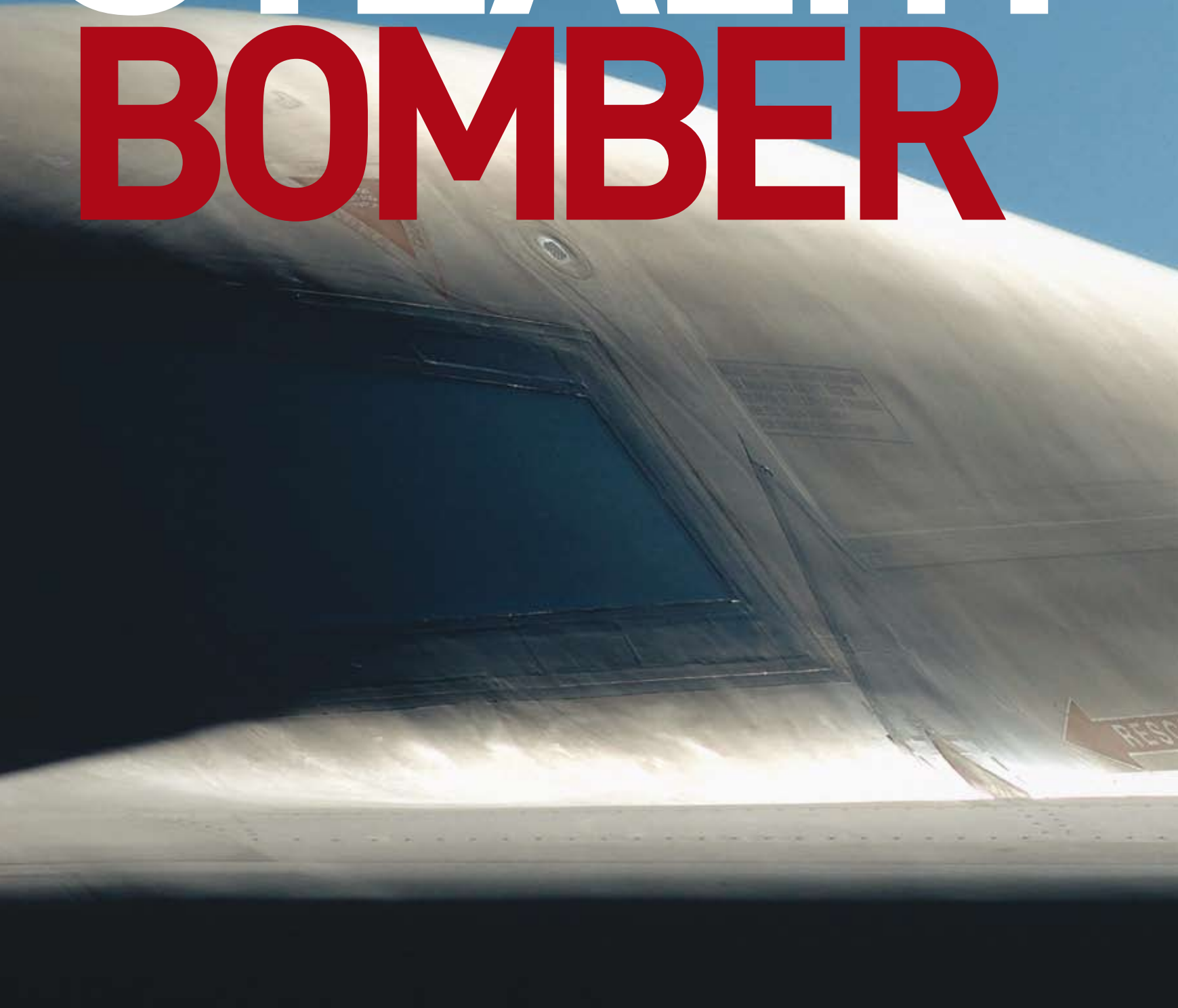# How to catch a
STEALTH
BOMBER

Marcus Barber offers up the Billion Dollar Idea ... or at least, how to generate it, recognise it and capture it. The rest is up to you.

WHILE THERE IS MUCH written about what an innovation is, there is much less on how to innovate in the first place, which is why I like reading, suggesting and trying methods that actually help you do innovation. The gap in the 'instructional' stuff is why magazines like Fast Thinking are so well received by the wider populace.

In this article, I want to start sharing with you a process for generating ideas that could be worth billions of dollars – literally. And those ideas that appear in this article are free to the world for someone to make their fortune – I wish you well.

It's a simple process I refer to as 'iiBubble' with the 'ii' standing for 'idea or innovation' and the 'bubble' being the brief encapsulation of the content about a subject. It is definitely linked to the creative process of idea generation, though I use this approach more as a 'reframing' step in order to arrive at those ideas. Reframing is the process of shifting your perspectives to see what emerges when you look at a problem, challenge or subject from a different

angle. Think of the character played by Robin Williams in the film Dead Poet's Society who implored his students to stand on top of their desks to obtain a new view of the world.

When it comes to business improvement and ideas for innovation, taking a moment to stand on top of our desks is probably the simplest of anything you can do, and far easier that trying to come up with a new idea in another well intentioned but usually unproductive free-wheeling brainstorming session.

One of the first really good books I read in the area of idea generation and creativity was Roger von Oech's A Whack on the Side of the Head, which shared some very straight forward, creative, disciplined and fun ways to generate new ideas. Originally published in 1983, the content is as relevant today as it was when I first read it way back then. Of all the other books and papers on creativity I have since read (about 50 odd) the only other book that stands along side it is Robert Sutton's (11½) Weird Ideas that Work published a couple of years ago. If the university sector was serious about teaching innovation and creativity those two books should be compulsory reading!

So my iiBubble process emerges out of much reading and has been refined with application with many clients and many employers. It is intended to help shift our thinking so that additional

answers might be available to us for solving a similar problem.

It works something like this:

- Identify what you are looking at (what is the challenge you are considering).
- Build a perspective of the challenge by identifying as many of the factors as you can that make up the challenge.
- Check to see if any of those factors remind you of anything else or suggest a new perspective (for instance a choked up river might remind you of a dripping tap; or a content management system might remind you of a piece of broccoli).
- Ask questions about the new perspective – "How are dripping taps and choked rivers related?", "What does the shape of broccoli suggest about how our content management system currently operates?", "'How do we currently fix dripping taps? – could we use that approach to fix this choked river?", "Does the way broccoli retains its shape even when it loses a few buds, suggest ways for us to make our CMS more resilient and effective?" and so on.
- Using the newly acquired and different perspective, build a potential new approach to solving the challenge you are considering.

By way of illustration, here are a few iiBubbles I'd like to share with you. Remember these iiBubbles aren't necessarily the answer to anything though they may stand alone as a potential approach to solving the challenge they consider. What we hope to achieve is a shift in perspective to see what else might be possible as the 'conversation' in this iiBubble suggests:

The Challenge:

Australia's ongoing exposure to drought is going to cause us more problems in the future, such as difficulties for farmers growing crops or running livestock and our intention is to find a way to generate more water access in the areas that we need it.

The Factors:

Australia is essentially a dry and flat continent lacking rainfall in the middle; we need to find a way to increase rainfall; the rainfall on the eastern seaboard tends to fall to the east of the ranges; the water is needed more to the centre of Australia; due to the vast distance air travels across much of the continent, the air humidity stays dry in summer months minimising the chance of rain making us more reliant on good rainfalls in colder months.

The Changed Perspective:

This reminds me of an evaporative cooling system for your home – you extract the heat from one room by using it to evaporate water from a reservoir in a box – what we need to do is to cool the air down before it gets to the ranges using the heat from the middle of Australia to evaporate water which will increase the air humidity and potentially increase rainfall to the west of the ranges.

Ask Questions:

So how do we increase the humidity to the west of the ranges? We can't – although there is plenty of heat, there's no water in the centre of Australia. But what if there were? Well, where can we find the water – you can't add water if there isn't any. Well, what do we know about evaporative cooling systems – where do they get their water from? In a reservoir – some you fill up and then refill when they run dry and others have a permanent tap that keeps the reservoir filled. Okay, why can't we do the same thing in the middle of Australia?

Generate a Potential Solution:

A reservoir in the middle of Australia? It'd have to be huge and, given the size of Australia, it would have to be permanent. What about Lake Eyre? Would it be possible to turn Lake Eyre into a giant permanent inland sea that acts as our evaporative reservoir? And if we used water that we top up from near Port Augusta, we might also be able to turn it into a giant inland fishery.

And so on it would go.

Imagine if the next big engineering feat for Australia was making Lake Eyre deep enough, wide enough and permanent enough to become the cooling reservoir for this hot dry continent of ours and as a by product, turn it into our very own giant agrifishery free from poaching and plundering by other countries entering our territorial waters. Of course this is just an example of an iiBubble but you never know!

Let's look at another challenge (and I flag this as one of my very few personal bug-bears) – delays in getting on and off a plane.

How do we reduce the delays in getting a plane to depart on time when boarding passengers and how do we get off the plane more quickly once it has landed?

Planes board people in a very clumsy way – some load people up the back first, some put the business class passengers on first and some do it all ad-hoc; passengers run late; passengers carry too much baggage onto the plane; there isn't enough overhead luggage space; people get into their seats but have to get up again to let the person nearer the window get into the seat and this slows everyone else down. When we land,

> **Remember that the purpose of the approach is to shift perspective,** not necessarily coming up with the immediate resolution to a challenge

people stand up but have to wait for people to get their luggage down from the overhead compartments. In the meantime, the plane is 'empty' at the front. Some people have to go to the baggage carousel anyway, so why are they in a hurry to get off the plane? People with no baggage to pick up from the carousel still have to wait as long as everyone else to get off the plane, even though they would be able to get off the plane quicker than anyone else.

This is very similar to the way a pepper grinder works. Large peppercorns (people with lots of luggage) have to be crushed to make it smaller ('debagged') before it can fit through the hole in the grinder plate (get on or off the plane). Once it is small enough it gets through in varying sizes far smaller than the peppercorn size it once was. The smaller stuff always gets out first which is why good waiters shake the pepper grinder before using it, to ensure a good even mix of pepper size (how airlines treat passengers now).

What can we learn from this perspective? How do we make the peppercorns smaller so that the smaller pieces don't take so long to get out rather than having to mix in with all of the big chunkier pieces of peppercorns? What about the pepper that doesn't need to be crushed any further to get out?

What does this suggest about how airlines load or disembark passengers? Why don't they put people with no luggage at all at the front of the plane first, and people with increasing amounts of luggage to the back of the plane. By the time people get their luggage out of the overhead lockers, the people with no luggage will have stood up and already left the plane. In fact the people who carry no luggage would

be rewarded at the end of the flight by being able to get off the plane unhindered by those with luggage, reducing any delays. When getting on the plane the benefits accrue to all passengers because it requires no additional effort to just get on the plane and sit down making embarkation easier for all and greatly reducing the delays attributable to loading passengers.

Sure it sounds too simple, doesn't it? But it is not so much of a stretch when you think about it. Instead of having to crush the full size peppercorn (the passenger with all of their luggage) down to the right size delaying everyone else that is ready to go, you just pack the plane differently using what I suggest is a much smarter criterion.

As you embed this iiBubble approach into your thinking you get to the point where you can quickly encapsulate an entire issue or challenge into a single question that also poses a solution as in the following that I used with one particular client: 'If Australia is wanting to 'go nuclear', why wouldn't it site five or so nuclear reactors at Maralinga? There's a suggestion that the site is still radioactive, so putting the reactors there should pose less of a problem for people, plus the copper industry would benefit from supplying the copper cables that send the electricity all around Australia.'

Remember that the purpose of the approach is to shift perspective, not necessarily coming up with the immediate resolution to a challenge. In the example above, the iiBubble lead to a discussion over engineering issues for power transmission, safety requirements for power generation and what to do with the waste. And the issue we were discussing? This firm was looking at business development opportunities for one of its major divisions.

Before I go – the iiBubble for How to Catch a Stealth Bomber.

If you considered a stealth bomber to be nothing more than a low-flying hard-to-see insect (like a mosquito buzzing around your head in the dark) then what you could conceive of is an object that acts like a can of insecticide spray, except in this instance, instead of killing the insect, it would remove its camouflage making it easier to see. For the stealth bomber application, it might be a spray application along a potential stealth bomber flight path that sticks to the plane, thus making it much more vulnerable to detection by radar. Now you can see it, can you catch it?

The iiBubble idea is like many of the deliberate approaches to generating ideas – a structured approach to creativity. In this case, what it urges you to do is change the way you look at the challenge, just like standing on that desktop. If you have any iiBubbles you'd like to share in the next edition of Fast Thinking or have a challenge you'd like me to iiBubble for you, feel free to contact me. ♣

Marcus Barber is director of Looking Up Feeling Good Pty Ltd – answers@lufg.com.au