

# Serious play

These Boeing employees have a place where they can be creative and ‘game’-storm

By Peggy Mason and photos by Paul Pinner

**W**elcome to the “innovation cell” at Boeing’s Huntington Beach, Calif., site. Let the games begin!

Coming up with creative ideas that provide solutions for a diverse customer base is what Boeing is all about. To that end, one Boeing leader encourages his employees to experiment fearlessly, think outside the box and play games. That’s right—play games.

The games inspire creativity, and it’s creativity that will propel Boeing forward in fiercely competitive markets, according to Charles Toups, vice president and general manager of Network and Tactical Systems.

It was Toups who put in place the innovation cell. Inspired by the entrepreneurial spirit of companies

like Google and IDEO, the space is very different from a typical Boeing meeting room.

“There is no meeting table, any and all ideas are displayed on the walls, there are health-oriented drinks and snacks, and there’s even a PlayStation 3,” said Jason Brandstetter, a strategy and integration engineer with Network and Tactical Systems.

Added software engineer Lance

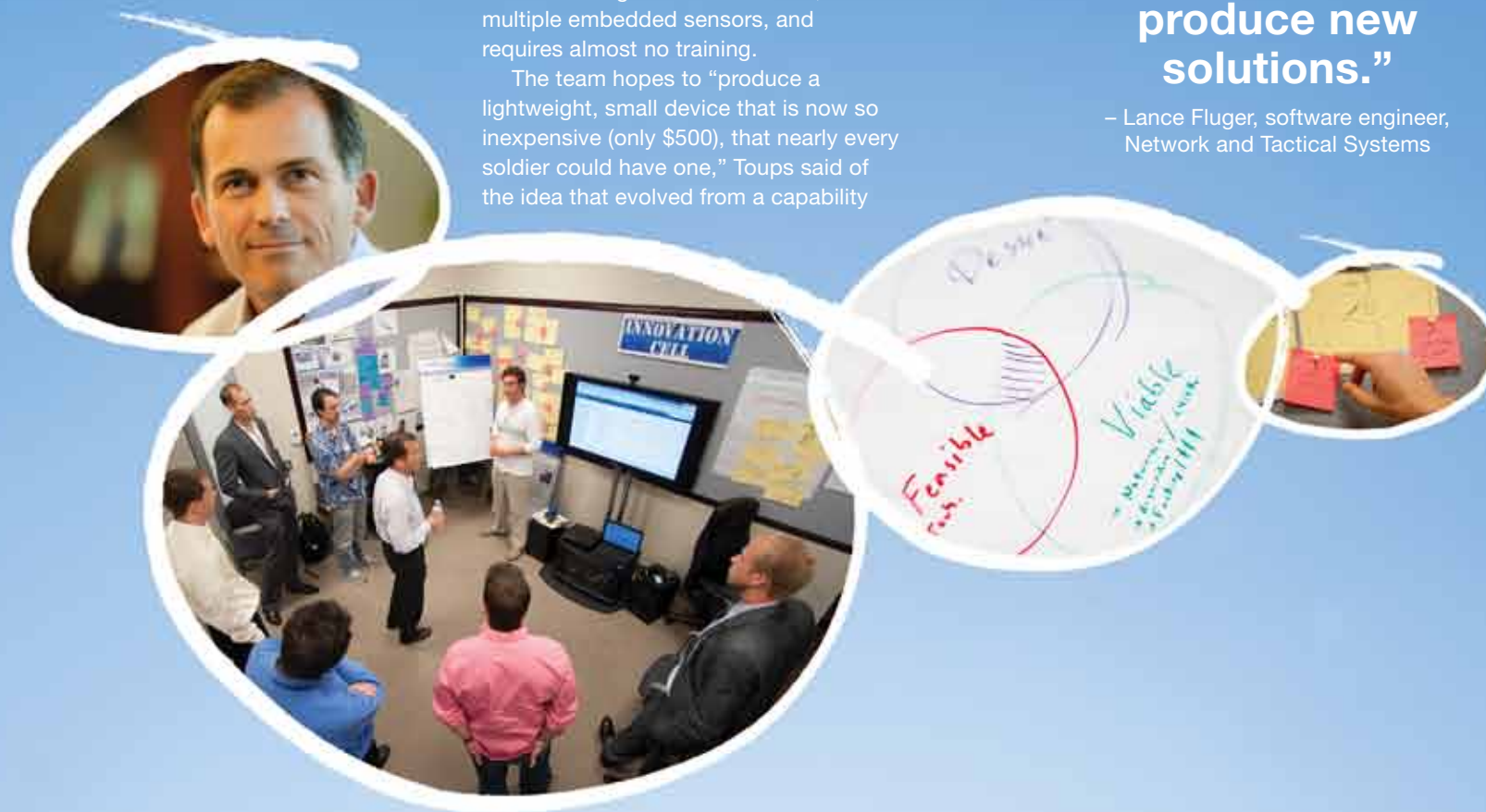
Fluger, also with Network and Tactical Systems: “Employees from every level of talent and experience come together in a relaxed environment to produce new solutions.”

Employees use the room on their own time, but Toups provides funds for small purchases if an idea shows promise. One team came up with an idea to add Boeing capability to a toy that takes off and lands vertically, can be flown using an iPhone or iPad, has multiple embedded sensors, and requires almost no training.

The team hopes to “produce a lightweight, small device that is now so inexpensive (only \$500), that nearly every soldier could have one,” Toups said of the idea that evolved from a capability

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– Lance Fluger, software engineer, Network and Tactical Systems



**PHOTOS: (Far left)** Charles Toups, vice president and general manager, Network and Tactical Systems. **(Left)** Toups (center, facing screen), talks with Huntington Beach, Calif., employees who frequent the innovation cell. Clockwise from top center are Michael Hogan, Kevin Meredith, Ryan Whitaker, Gabriel Santander, Jason Brandstetter, Lance Fluger and Scott Buyan. **(Above)** It’s liftoff for the team’s current project—a toy the group is adapting for potential warfighter use. Controlling the vertical liftoff is Michael Hogan (from left) with Kevin Meredith, Sarah Kamilaris and Lance Fluger.

that the U.S. Army canceled—the Class I Unmanned Aerial Vehicle.

The original purpose of the unmanned craft was to hover near an area of interest and relay real-time information to soldiers. The Boeing team took that idea and added refinements that may eventually lead to a new product for the customer.

Ultimately, the purpose of the innovation cell is to identify people who are passionate about solving critical problems, produce solutions that can be funded and offered to customers, and develop talent within Boeing, particularly with younger employees who are eager to work on interesting projects and provide creative solutions.

Toups expressed concern that the newest generation of employees may not stay with Boeing if they aren't allowed

to be creative: "We often hear feedback from employees who leave the company within their first five years that they get frustrated because they don't get the chance to work on anything as exciting as they'd hoped.

"Too often, companies become constrained by their own successes," he added. "The bigger the program of record, the more we tend to focus on meeting requirements and the less we focus on innovation. Merely fulfilling contract requirements isn't necessarily all that is needed. We really have to think outside the box and figure out what the customer needs, even if that varies from the formal requirements. We need to work better and be more in line with the needs, not just the requirements of our customers."

Adam Weiss is one of Boeing's newly hired aerospace engineers. He described the innovation cell as "an amazing opportunity," noting that he is free to express his own ideas with others who have more experience.

"The concept of 'no bad ideas' has created a nurturing environment where we can feel free to do what we came here to do: engineer," said Weiss, who hopes to expand on an idea that he's been talking about with his mentor.

That's the kind of feedback about the innovation cell that Toups loves to hear.

"Every now and then, I'll stop by to see what they're up to," Toups said of those who use the innovation cell. "I see the amazing things they're coming up with, and I get inspired, too!" ■

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**PHOTOS:** Game play is one of the tools used in the innovation cell to generate ideas that could turn into new products for Boeing. **(Left)** Ryan Whitaker concentrates on his aim. **(Above)** Lance Fluger (from left) watches as Jason Brandstetter and Sarah Kamilaris compete.