

Analogous Inspiration Creative Thinking Tool

When traditional solutions aren't cutting it, look where others have already solved similar problems

Picture this: you're wrestling with a seemingly impossible challenge, and conventional approaches just aren't working. That's exactly when analogous inspiration becomes your secret weapon. It's about being curious enough to ask, "Who else has solved something like this?" and brave enough to look in completely unexpected places for answers.

This isn't just about copying what others have done—it's about recognising that nature has been solving complex problems for millions of years, and other industries have faced challenges remarkably similar to yours. The magic happens when you spot these patterns and adapt brilliant solutions from one context to solve problems in another.

Two Pathways to Breakthrough Solutions

Approach 1: Learning from Nature's 3.8-Billion-Year R&D Lab

Think of nature as the ultimate research and development laboratory. Every creature, plant, and natural process you see today has survived countless tests and improvements. When you're stuck on a design challenge, step outside and ask: "How would nature handle this?"

Your Nature Detective Process:

1. **Strip your challenge to its essence** - Forget the industry jargon and ask: what is this problem really about at its core?
2. **Become a nature documentary fan** - Look for animals, plants, or natural phenomena that face similar challenges
3. **Get curious about the "how"** - Don't just observe what happens, dig into the mechanisms behind it
4. **Bridge the gap** - Ask yourself how these natural principles could work in your human-made world

Stories from Nature's Laboratory:

- **Velcro's Dog Walk Discovery:** In 1941, Swiss engineer George de Mestral was annoyed by plant burrs sticking to his dog's fur during their Alpine walks. Most people would have just brushed them off, but de Mestral got curious. Under a microscope, he discovered tiny hooks that grabbed onto fur loops with incredible efficiency—strong enough to hold, but easy to remove when needed. This "annoying" natural phenomenon became Velcro, essential for everything from space missions (where traditional fasteners fail in zero gravity) to children's shoes. Sometimes your biggest breakthrough comes from paying attention to life's small irritations.
- **Mercedes-Benz and the Boxfish Paradox:** In 2005, Mercedes-Benz created the Bionic concept car based on the boxfish, believing its angular shape offered both low

drag and high stability. The car achieved a remarkable drag coefficient of 0.19. However, later research revealed that boxfish actually have relatively high drag compared to other fish shapes, and their angular bodies create instability rather than the stability initially assumed. This teaches us that nature's solutions aren't always what they first appear to be—sometimes the lesson is in understanding the trade-offs creatures make rather than assuming perfection.

- **Termites Teaching Us About Air Conditioning:** In the scorching African heat, termites maintain perfectly comfortable temperatures in their mounds without any external energy source. They've engineered sophisticated ventilation systems where hot air rises through central chimneys whilst cool air flows in through side channels, creating natural convection currents. Architects studying these tiny engineers have created human buildings that stay comfortable with 90% less energy than traditional air conditioning. The Eastgate Centre in Zimbabwe proves that sometimes the best climate control comes from creatures smaller than your thumb.

Approach 2: Cross-Industry Detective Work

The solution to your problem might already exist—just in a completely different world. This is about being humble enough to admit that your industry doesn't have all the answers. Some of the most brilliant innovations come from asking: "Who else deals with something like this?"

Your Cross-Industry Detective Process:

1. **Describe your challenge like you're explaining it to a child** - Strip away all the technical language and industry assumptions
2. **Play the "similar challenges" game** - What other industries need to do something fundamentally similar?
3. **Become a student of their solutions** - How do they actually solve these problems day-to-day?
4. **Ask "What if we tried that here?"** - Adapt their proven approaches to your specific context

Stories of Cross-Pollination Magic:

- **When Formula 1 Met Healthcare:** Hospital administrators at Great Ormond Street Hospital were losing sleep over patient handover errors—crucial information getting lost when patients moved between departments, leading to medical mistakes. Then someone had a wild idea: "What if we handled patient transfers like Formula 1 pit stops?" Both faced identical challenges: multiple specialists needed to coordinate quickly, critical information had to be transferred accurately, and any mistakes could be catastrophic. The hospital adapted F1 techniques by creating standardised handover checklists, assigning specific roles to each team member, conducting regular practice drills, and implementing clear communication protocols. The result? A 42% reduction in handover errors and decreased handover time from 20 minutes to 8 minutes, directly improving patient safety.
- **Disney's Queue Psychology Meets Aviation:** Disney theme parks master the psychology of waiting through creative queue design, entertainment distractions, and perceived versus actual wait time management. They discovered that people tolerate

longer waits when they're entertained, informed about progress, and feel the experience is fair. Airports adapted Disney's strategies to improve passenger flow during security, check-in, and boarding. They implemented entertainment in waiting areas, clear signage showing expected wait times, serpentine queue designs that make lines appear shorter, and prioritisation systems that feel fair to all passengers. Singapore Changi Airport reduced perceived wait times by 35% whilst handling more passengers through the same physical spaces.

- **Military Logistics Transforms Retail:** Military logistics systems excel at moving vast quantities of supplies to unpredictable locations under extreme time pressure with perfect accuracy—soldiers' lives depend on the right supplies arriving at the right place and time. Walmart's founders recognised that retail faced similar challenges: moving thousands of products from suppliers to stores efficiently whilst minimising costs and stockouts. They adapted military principles, including centralised command centres for real-time inventory tracking, cross-docking facilities to minimise handling, strategic supplier partnerships, and sophisticated forecasting systems. This adaptation made Walmart the world's largest retailer by enabling lower prices through superior supply chain efficiency.

Running an Analogous Inspiration Session

Setting the Stage (15 minutes)

Write your challenge on the wall in the simplest terms possible—if your grandmother couldn't understand it, simplify it more. Get your team comfortable with being curious rather than experts. You're about to venture outside your industry comfort zone, and the best discoveries often feel a bit uncomfortable at first.

Nature's Wisdom Hunt (25 minutes)

The "What Would Nature Do?" Phase (10 minutes) Ask your team: "What animals, plants, or natural processes deal with something similar to our challenge?" Don't worry if the connections seem far-fetched initially—write down everything that comes to mind, from the tiniest insects to massive weather systems.

The Deep Dive Discovery (15 minutes) Pick your 2-3 most intriguing natural analogies and become temporary biologists. How do these natural systems actually work? What makes them so effective? The mechanisms and principles behind natural solutions are where the magic lives.

Cross-Industry Exploration (25 minutes)

The "Who Else?" Brainstorm (10 minutes) Strip away all the jargon and ask: "Who else in the world faces fundamentally similar challenges?" Consider completely unrelated industries—restaurants managing customer flow, airlines coordinating schedules, sports teams building trust, or even video games creating engagement.

The Solution Safari (15 minutes) Choose your most promising industries and become temporary anthropologists studying their world. How do they actually solve these problems day-to-day? What have they learned that your industry might be missing?

The Bridge-Building Phase (20 minutes)

Making the Leap (10 minutes) For each natural or cross-industry solution you've discovered, ask: "How could this principle work in our world?" Focus on capturing the core insight and figuring out how to make it relevant to your specific challenge.

Reality Check and Dream Big (10 minutes) Look at your adapted concepts with both optimism and realism. Which ones make your team lean forward with excitement? Which ones feel feasible enough to test quickly? Don't abandon the seemingly impossible ideas—sometimes they just need more time to develop.

Your Exploration Guidelines

- **Think beyond your industry:** The best solutions often come from the most unexpected places
- **Focus on principles, not just practices:** What makes something work is often more important than what it looks like
- **Stay curious, not critical:** Your inner sceptic isn't invited to this exploration phase
- **Research thoroughly:** Surface-level understanding leads to surface-level solutions
- **Document your journey:** The connections you make between analogies and your problem are valuable insights

Capturing Your Discoveries

Create visual maps showing the connections between your analogies and your challenge. Draw the principles you've discovered and how they might translate. Note which combinations of different analogies might work together. Keep track of what resources you'd need to test these adapted solutions—some might be simpler to try than they first appear.

Your Next Adventure Steps

Research the feasibility of your most promising adapted solutions. Connect with experts in the fields you've borrowed from—they often love sharing knowledge with curious outsiders. Create simple prototypes to test whether these cross-pollinated ideas actually work in your context. Remember, the goal isn't perfect adaptation, but inspired innovation that opens up new possibilities you never knew existed.