



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

Do Your Best with This Car Expression

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And now, *Words and Their Stories*, from VOA Learning English.

This program explores words and phrases in the English language.

And today we talk about an expression that comes from the world of vehicles and the engines that power them.

In an **internal combustion** engine, a **cylinder** is said to be firing when the fuel inside it is **ignited**, or lit. With that small, contained explosion, the engine starts and the car is ready to go! Most engines have four cylinders. Some very powerful vehicles have six or even eight cylinders!

That brings us to today's expression: to fire on all cylinders.

When you are “firing on all cylinders,” you are working or functioning at the greatest possible level of **efficiency**, speed or productivity. In other words, you are at your **peak performance**. You cannot do much better.

Sometimes we use this expression to mean we are using all our energy to do something. We are working as well as possible. For example, some people can only fire on all cylinders after they have had a good night's sleep.

We often use this expression in the **negative** form. For example, every morning, I have two cups of very strong, black coffee. The coffee helps my brain come to life. So, if someone tries to talk to me in the morning before I've had my coffee, I might say to them. “Can this wait? I'm not firing on all cylinders yet.”

However, I would probably not say that to a supervisor. The expression is very **informal**.

Now let's hear this expression used by two co-workers.

A: Hey, can you hand me that notebook? It has all my notes for today's meeting.

B: (yawns) I'm sorry. Are you talking to me?

A: You seem like you need more sleep. You do realize this meeting about our project will decide your future for the next month.

B: I know. It's just really early. I don't fire on all cylinders until at least 10am.

A: Well, you had better get your cylinders fired up because here comes the client.

Before you take on your next big project, make sure you are firing on all cylinders.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

internal combustion engine – *n.* a heat engine in which the combustion that generates the heat takes place inside the engine proper instead of in a furnace

cylinder – *n.* the piston chamber in an engine : also, a long round body whether hollow or solid

ignite – *v.* to cause (a fuel) to burn

efficiency – *n.* the ability to do something or produce something without waste

peak – *adj.* being at or reaching the maximum

performance – *n.* the carrying out of an action

negative – *adj.* emphasizing the bad side of a person, situation, or thing

informal – *adj.* not requiring serious or formal behavior or dress : suitable for ordinary or everyday use with close friends and family
