



## ***The Firefly Effect – The Secret to Igniting Innovation on Your Team***

By Kimberly Douglas, SPHR

The recession is in full swing and companies everywhere are feeling the pain. Yours is likely no exception. Shrinking budgets, sweeping layoffs, and a smothering malaise that's settled over your workforce make it hard to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes, even the most optimistic leader finds him or herself wondering, *Is there an end to this particular tunnel?* Sure there is, but you're going to have to excavate it yourself—and you're going to have to light your own way.

Innovation is the only ticket out of this recession. I'm not just talking about product development. I'm talking about new services, business processes, means of communication, and methods of collaboration. Innovation is *everyone's* job. It's no longer the purview of R&D or marketing. And it's not one big initiative. It's a lot of small changes and improvements that, together, make a big difference.

Ultimately, companies that can churn out innovative ideas—good, workable, innovative ideas—will be able to adapt to the new realities we face. Those that can't, won't.

The heart of innovation, of course, is people working together eagerly, intelligently, and productively. When this synergy happens, ideas pour forth like water from a newly tapped underground spring—or, as I like to say – fireflies showing up *en masse* at dusk.

I like to use the firefly metaphor—the image of children working together to catch these glowing creatures—to illustrate how successful teams use their individual talents collectively to focus on critical business challenges. (It fact, it's the topic of my new book *The Firefly Effect*.)

So how can you deliberately create a more innovative culture—call it "Operation FireFly"—within your team or company? Let me light your way by sharing these 9 targeted tips:

**Understand the (nonflashy) new role of leadership.** First, establish a safe, respectful environment where individual creativity can emerge. Next, focus that energy in the right direction based on the team's core purpose and targeted goals. To be successful today you must lead through inspiration and collaboration. Look at your current behaviors and decide which are helping you create a culture of engagement and which aren't. Start small—and stick with it.

**Search for untapped talent on your team.** Did you know that what look like plain old fireflies are actually comprised of more than 2,000 known species? Well, likewise your employees are far more complex and unique than you might think. Use proven tools like the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument to shine the light on these hidden talents. Employees who are recognized as unique with significant contributions to make, become

more engaged and passionate about their work. It's almost like hiring a team of new creative superstars.

**Encourage productive conflict – aka “creative abrasion”.** Are you uncomfortable with conflict in the workplace? Don't be. Conflict is natural, expected, and can be a positive sign of diverse thinking on your team. Keep the conflict focused on the issues and don't let team members direct their ire at one another personally. Deal with *ferocious fireflies*, those toxic, manipulative employees who work hard to destroy trust and collaboration on the team. You know who they are; the rest of the team does too.

**Deal with other, more insidious "trust busters," too.** One common behavior I see on teams that damages and limits trust is sarcasm disguised as humor. In order to innovate, people must be able to connect with each other in a real, deeply personal way. If one or more members (especially the leader) are constantly throwing barbs at other team members under the guise of humor, they'll cause an erosion of trust.

**Make sure quieter fireflies have a chance to glow.** Certain people may naturally dominate the discussion while others tend to hang back and go with the flow. If your big talkers are always allowed to verbally run over the quieter/less visible members of your team, the same ideas and solutions will always get implemented. Instead, ask everyone to jot down their initial ideas in silence and then share them, round-robin style. Ask people to speak in headlines. Or ask everyone to “self-police” their participation levels.

**As a team leader, don't keep too tight a lid on the jar.** Just as fireflies' lights fade when they're held captive, a leader who dominates and controls his or her team will squelch creativity. Take deliberate steps not to do this. Don't sit at the head of the table. Use positive reinforcement (both verbally and nonverbally). Don't get into a prolonged conversation with only one or two other team members. Share your opinion on the topic last.

**Make meetings fun, exciting, and inviting.** Get team members to bring a creativity toy — interesting enough to engage your hands but not so fascinating that it's distracting. Use a whiteboard rather than the dreaded flipchart. Try techniques like mind-mapping (for left-brain thinkers) or brain-writing (for right-brain thinkers) to get creativity flowing. Make this team gathering the most engaging and productive time of the week. Don't laugh — it can happen if you really want it and make it a team priority.

**Shine the light of accountability on your team.** Even the most energetic, productive meeting means nothing if people don't follow up the decisions they reach with action. As a team, create a common picture of what personal accountability looks like. Then, delegate very specific assignments to very specific people. Finally, set a date for a follow-up meeting in which everyone must report on whether they fulfilled their commitments, and if not, why not.

**From time to time, escape the office for a creative excursion.** In these stressful times, people need a break from their current reality to think about “what if”. And I'm not talking about the stereotypical ropes course or fall-backwards-into-a-teammate's-arms. I've led and participated in “adult field trips” to a plane manufacturing plant, a zoo, a firehouse,

and a jazz jam session. We learned how these unique teams worked together and solved problems – and then applied these lessons to our own team. And they also help you see others on your team in a new light.

After reading this advice, you may be thinking, "Okay, all this talk of toys and trips to the zoo is fine for other companies or maybe other departments, but certainly not for my team. We're struggling to stay alive. We just don't have time for innovation."

Guess what? You're absolutely wrong. You *must* make time for innovation. Your survival depends on it.

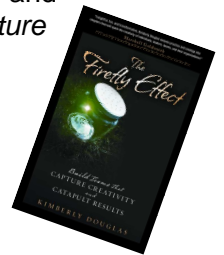
Start small – just devote one hour of team time to a truly innovative brainstorming session. Not only are you likely to generate one or more immediately usable ideas, you will also have reengaged your people in the excitement of their work. All it takes is for one person to have a bright idea and pass it on to others—like the spark of a firefly that magically illuminates a dark night.

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Kimberly holds a master of science in industrial/organizational psychology and has been certified as a Senior Professional in Human Resources for Life. She is also a certified practitioner of the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI). Prior to founding FireFly ten years ago, Kimberly was an organization effectiveness manager for Coca-Cola; a Director of Consulting with the Hay Group; and served in HR leadership roles in the healthcare, hospitality, and telecommunications industries. Her book, *The Firefly Effect: Build Teams That Capture Creativity and Catapult Results*, was just released by Wiley in May 2009.



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*"The Firefly Effect debunks the myth that creativity is an exclusive gift, shared by a select few. It provides real-world tools to unleash and direct the creative spark that lives in everyone and make teams more effective by celebrating and leveraging their differences".*

**Brad Shaw, SVP, Corporate Communications and External Affairs, The Home Depot**

*"In this fast paced and very readable book, Kimberly Douglas, herself a successful entrepreneur and valued consultant to numerous nimble and effective companies and their high-achieving executives, shares the lessons that propelled her remarkable accomplishments and that will motivate and assist each reader!"*

**David A. Jones, Sr., Co-founder and Chairman Emeritus, Humana Inc.**