Why Sleep Is a Strategic Resource

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[TALENT MANAGEMENT]

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BY CHRISTOPHER M. BARNES AND GRETCHEN SPREITZER

What do PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, Virgin Group founder Sir Richard Branson and Martha Stewart have in common? They don't need much sleep; it has been publicly reported that each regularly gets only six hours of sleep or less per night. By discussing their ability to get by with little sleep, these executives are serving as role models for a norm that a full night's sleep is optional, even a luxury, if you want to get ahead in business.

We believe that in this regard, these executives are not setting a good example, especially when it comes to getting the best performance out of the talent in an organization. Generally speaking, managers assume that simply getting the right talent in their organizations will lead to high levels of productivity. But this assumption ignores the fact that people often do not function at their best on an everyday basis. When work demands are high, people can become stressed, "burned out" and generally fatigued — resulting in compromised performance.

Simple as it sounds, regular sleep is the best antidote for a fatigued or stressed-out workforce. Of course, because sleep is in the realm of employees' private lives, organizations have generally shied away from trying to influence it, even in an era of controlling health-care costs through encouraging preventive behaviors.

Worse, many organizations have leaders who actively model behaviors that are not conducive to healthy sleep schedules. For example, if a leader regularly arrives at the crack of dawn or stays late into the evening, he or she is setting the expectation that others need to be at the office at all hours of the day and night — potentially interfering with good sleep patterns. Moreover, if leaders send emails late in the evening and expect a response before the next morning's workday, employees will feel pressure to monitor email until late at night.

In this article, we argue that sleep is a strategic resource. Organizations should both

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encourage and create a sleep-supportive culture and set of practices. We describe the ineffective and even dangerous conditions under which employees work while short on sleep and the variety of effects sleep deprivation has on individual and organizational performance. A critical takeaway is that even small deficits of sleep can have negative consequences. Although workers often convince themselves that missing a few hours here and there is no big deal, the literature suggests that doing so creates problems. In fact, missing less than one hour of sleep on one night has been linked to memory declines and increases in workplace injuries and "cyberloafing."

The Consequences of Lost Sleep

While individual sleep needs vary, the National Sleep Foundation notes that adults typically need seven to nine hours of sleep each night. Yet on any given day, 29.9% of Americans report having slept for less than six hours the previous night. Similar levels of sleep loss are reported in Korea, Britain, Finland and Sweden.

Sleep deprivation can lead to lower levels of effort, lower levels of interpersonal helping behavior and a higher prevalence of unethical and deviant behaviors. Moreover, a lack of sleep leads to lower levels of trust and cooperation in negotiation processes. Similarly, sleep deprivation hinders multitasking performance: Sleepy people have a harder time focusing on a particular task, and performance suffers across all tasks being juggled. In addition, a lack of sleep has been linked to a higher prevalence of workplace injuries, as well as greater injury severity.

Given how important it is for companies to control health-care costs, it is also important to reiterate the link between good sleep patterns and health. Those suffering from chronic sleep loss are more likely to get sick, feel depressed and be obese.

How to Manage the Strategic Resource of Sleep

Sleep loss is influenced by the workplace demands and expectations of employers. Whether employees are traveling across several time zones for an important meeting, taking repeated late-night conference calls with a global client or replying to texts and emails after work hours, their jobs are inextricably linked with their ability (and often, inability) to establish healthy sleep habits. This is why we suggest that managers take active steps to protect and preserve the strategic resource of sleep. Here are seven strategies for doing so.

1. Create a work culture that values sleep. Perhaps the most important strategy for managing sleep in organizations is tied to leader behaviors and work culture. Both Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos and Huffington Post president and editor-in-chief Arianna Huffington have made public statements about how they benefit from a full night's sleep. Huffington, in fact, has written that "there's practically no aspect of life that's not improved by sleep." As a leader, you should keep Bezos and Huffington in mind. Remember that your employees will respond to not only what you say about sleep but also how your policies and actions back up the talking.

For example, as we've pointed out, if leaders send messages late in the evening, employees will feel pressure to watch their email late into the night. To minimize this problem, one executive continued to craft emails late at night but used a scheduling feature so they would not be sent until normal business hours in the morning.

2. Leverage your wellness program to improve sleep habits. The nicotine that makes smoking so addictive has stimulant properties that can create sleep difficulties. Smoking cessation programs can wean smokers off cigarettes — and in the process, improve employees' sleep habits. Wellness programs can also help employees be more aware of the dangerous side effects of being overweight. Obese individuals are more likely to suffer from sleep apnea, a condition in which individuals briefly stop breathing during sleep. This makes it hard for them to get the restorative deep levels of sleep that allow them to wake up refreshed in the morning, even when they have been asleep for at least seven hours. Then there are the forces of stress and anxiety, which often keep employees awake at night staring at the ceiling while they worry. While getting to the root of the stressor is the most powerful intervention, other wellness strategies, including exercise and meditation, can help alleviate stress so employees can fall asleep quickly — and stay asleep through the night.

3. Allow employees to separate from work when the workday is finished. Better sleep habits are likely to follow when employees feel some separation from work at the end of the day. Technologies such as smartphones can keep employees on a short tether to work. While these can provide flexibility for people to be available even when away from the office to attend, for example, a child's school event, they also can create the sense that one is always "on call." Leslie A. Perlow, the Konosuke Matsushita Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School and the author of the book *Sleeping With Your Smartphone: How to Break the 24/7 Habit and Change the Way You Work*, has shared statistics about a study she conducted examining how managers and professionals integrated their smartphones into their lives. She found that 26% admitted to sleeping with their smartphones, and 56% said they checked their phone within an hour before going to bed.

Perlow recommends scheduling time away from work

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when the phone will be turned off. Some might question how professional service employees, like consultants, can schedule predictable time off while still being responsive to clients. Perlow has, in fact, conducted research with consultants from the Boston Consulting Group. One experiment, for example, required each participating consultant to take one scheduled night off from work-related tasks a week. The consultants were initially skeptical, but at the end of the experiments, participating consultants reported benefits such as higher job satisfaction and better deliverables for clients.

4. Create nap rooms and encourage their use. Naps that occur during natural dips in circadian rhythms, such as between 1 and 3 p.m., are especially effective. Moreover, keeping naps under 30 minutes (preferably around 20 minutes) minimizes the probability of entering deeper stages of sleep that will result in sleep inertia upon awakening. The idea is to wake up energized, not groggy. Thus employees who are struggling due to sleep deprivation that is either acute (for instance, up through the night with a sick child) or chronic (for example, insomnia) can alleviate the problem with a short period of sleep during the day.

If a few minutes of napping prevents a costly mistake, then encouraging a napping culture will be a wise investment for the organization. One example: Google Inc. has "nap pods" to facilitate employee napping.

5. Limit the number of hours employees are scheduled to work. Sleep experts suggest that sleep policies should limit scheduled work to no more than 12 hours a day, and preferably less than that. Across a week, employees should not be scheduled to work more than 60 hours and not permitted to work more than 80 hours. Global companies requiring international travel should create policies allowing travelers to rest for one day after a red-eye flight.

6. Try to reduce shift work. On average, people are physiologically ill-suited for sleeping during daylight hours (even with blackout curtains and white-noise machines). Accidents happen at a much higher rate during night shifts. Work schedules that fight natural circadian rhythms will disrupt sleep patterns and should be avoided if possible. Some organizations try to spread night shifts across people over time, in a rotating shift system. Though their intentions are good, rotating shifts are disruptive to sleep patterns, especially when rotating backward (a night shift followed by a day shift followed by a morning shift) rather than forward (a

morning shift followed by a day shift followed by a night shift).

Shifts longer than eight hours (such as the 10- or even 12-hour shifts that nurses often work) also produce effects that are similar to a lack of sleep and should also be avoided if possible. Service work that can be done virtually (on the phone or via computer, like staffing call centers) might be shifted geographically so that employees, wherever they are located, are always working normal daytime business hours in their own locations, even as they are communicating with customers in other parts of the world where it's nighttime or early morning. Likewise, for new product development teams working on tight schedules, work flow can be distributed among different parts of the world, following the sun, so engineers are always working daytime shifts. Managers may even be able to shift daytime labor away from less critical projects to highly critical ones, ensuring that employees will be near their physiological peaks.

7. Make sure your disaster plan includes rest rotations. Disaster response can be a stressful time when employees work for extended periods without a good night's sleep (in situations when they need particularly good judgment). Disaster plans should include

arrangements for ensuring that employees get enough sleep so they can sustain their performance through the crisis recovery. For example, during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, utilities executives coordinated schedules to ensure that each person rotated off for a specified period to a darkened room with a cot to sleep.

A Key to Human Sustainability

Sleep is a strategic resource that is a key to human sustainability. Rather than taking an employee's sleep as a given, leaders should create sleep-supportive cultures and practices. Practices such as managing work schedules, providing good role models and reinforcing sleep-protecting behaviors can help companies move in the right direction.

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