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What Most Leaders Don't Understand About Sleep



If a week of short sleep can lower your IQ, leaders can't afford to skimp on sleep, says WSJ Expert C. L. Max Nikias. Photo / iStock Images

By C. L. Max Nikias

“Sleep is the healer of all mortal suffering,” Sophocles wrote in *Philoctetes*.

I learned this lesson the hard way, as a freshman at the National Technical University of Athens, staying up for most of the night to prepare for a math final. Despite it being my strongest subject, the lack of sleep caught up to me, and I failed the exam.

Thankfully, university policy at the time

allowed me to retake the final and I managed to salvage my grade. But what I learned about sleep that day ensured that my first exam failure would also be my last. And it is a lesson I have carried through to my professional life: no amount of preparation can fully replace the benefit of sleep.

Yet conventional wisdom often pulls leaders in the opposite direction. Even *The Wall Street Journal* has suggested

that 4 a.m. is the most productive hour. But unless I'm catching an early flight, you'll find me sleeping soundly—without apology—at that hour!

Even the most driven leader needs to understand that, to some extent, biology is destiny. A few lucky people can function on only a few hours of sleep each night—but generally, adult human beings need 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night to restore

their mental and physical state.

Some studies have even suggested that, if you go through a workweek while consistently sleep-deprived, you will finish the week with 15 fewer IQ points than you began it with. Think about it: You were probably hired as an executive at least in part because of your knowledge and decision-making ability; so if you willingly allow those to be impaired, you are doing a disservice to your organization.

Coffee and adrenaline can help, but only marginally. Though so many ambitious people try various “hacks” to operate on less sleep than normal, it has been established that only pure, old-fashioned sleep can maintain cognitive and emotional intelligence and physical health.

For several reasons, the early riser may not succeed in today’s workplace. More and more, the leader’s job carries through the workday and into the evening, to network, dine with stakeholders or entertain guests. To wake up at 4 a.m. and to have enough energy for an evening that ends at 10 p.m. is impossible.

A few naps would be the obvious solution, but despite the nap pods in some contemporary offices, ours is not yet a

siesta culture in which an employee—much less a credible leader—can consistently be found unconscious in the afternoon.

My own typical routine involves a reasonable wake-up time, with work appointments held until I have concluded a strict and consistent preparatory regimen that includes coffee, morning reading, and a workout. It is for this reason that I do not take breakfast meetings.

The combination of enough sleep and a daily exercise routine builds peace of mind, makes me more productive and helps build resolve to face the pressures of the day.

And because of the nature of my responsibilities, almost every evening involves events that I must host or attend. Still, I try to be in bed no later than 11 p.m. A leader must know their limits, for their own good and the good of the organization.

Early to bed and early to rise was a productive formula for an agrarian age. But our digital age extends the productivity window each day beyond our personal limits. Identifying your most productive time of day and protecting your sleep puts your best, smartest, most resilient self in your office chair each morning.



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