

Snoozing is Winning – about sleep and leadership

By Katie Scutt

We know sleep is important. We also know it can be hard to prioritise when we face challenging situations that demand our time. However, there are some compelling reasons to consider prioritising sleep, *especially* when we face these challenges.

The role of sleep goes far beyond the physiological benefits that restore our bodies and minds each night. It is an essential support for us as leaders in a world that is rapidly changing and that demands innovative and new solutions to complex problems. To demonstrate this, here are three amazing things about sleep:

1. **Problem solving:** We all know the saying “sleep on it”. Well, as it turns out, there is a lot of merit to it. A good night’s sleep makes us more likely to be able to solve complex problems (Sio, Monaghan, & Ormerod, 2013). So, if there’s a problem that you’re struggling to solve, ensuring you get a good night’s sleep may just help give you the answer the next day.
2. **Insight:** We have all experienced those “ah ha” moments, where all of a sudden the dots are connected and things that didn’t make sense, now do. This is insight. A good night’s sleep can more than double the likelihood of accessing it (Wagner, Gais, Haider, Verleger, & Born, 2004). In fact, sleep almost certainly contributed to those moments we have experienced. Without quality sleep, it’s far less likely that we will be able to think outside the box of our conscious thinking to join the dots in a way that gives us such insight.



- 3. Creativity:** It's hard to deny that creativity is an elusive skill that we feel like we either have or we don't. We are all creative, we just need to access our creativity and redefine what it means to us. It's not just artists and writers that have creative licence. Sleep supports us in being able to think more flexibly (as opposed to rigidly) which is essential for creativity (Walker, Liston, Hobson, & Stickgold, 2002). Did you know that the periodic table of elements was attributed to a dream Dmitry Mendeleev had? Many other scientific discoveries have anecdotally been attributed to creative solutions to problems that the owners have struggled with solving. Sleep helps us access our creativity, whatever it means to us.

For those interested in the details or who need more convincing, a little bit about why this is the case...

The phase of sleep that is mainly associated with problem solving, creativity and insight is REM (rapid eye movement). This is the phase where all of those weird dreams that seemingly have no logic happen. In this phase, the rational part of your brain (frontal and pre-frontal cortex) quietens down allowing the more primal parts of your brain that have your memories and emotions to run rampant. This means that ideas and concepts that are very weakly related can freely be reorganised and connected in novel ways that our conscious minds wouldn't allow. It is this process that helps with problem solving, creativity and insight. Thomas Edison reportedly slept with a ball in his hand so he would wake as he was drifting off to sleep so he could access his dreaming thoughts.

This doesn't have to only happen while we sleep. After we have woken from REM sleep, the rational part of our brain doesn't switch back on for about 15 minutes, so it might just pay to keep a notepad and pen by the side of your bed to write down some of those seemingly random dreams and ideas. They may later prove to be invaluable in helping you solve a challenge you are facing.

References

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