

## Sleep yourself to success

by Dragan Milicevic on May 2020

*"Sixty years of scientific research prevent me from accepting anyone who tells me that he or she can "get by on just four or five hours of sleep a night just fine."*

*-Matthew Walker*

Just before social distancing became the order of the day, I attended a dinner party. We were a mixed group of 8 people, - some investment bankers, lawyers, marketing executives, consultants, and doctors. The conversation turned to the subject of time spent working each week. They rushed to outbid each other – 60 hours. 70 hours. 80 hours! - often with a touch of pride. They compared this to their hours of sleep: "I need max 5-6 hours and I'm ready to go" was a common theme. One even claimed, "My team and I can pull several all-nighters and still be on top of our game". Then there was the surgeon performing life-saving operations working 30-hour shifts. When someone concluded: "lunch is for losers" my fork fell from my startled fingers –everyone jumped.



We constantly push our bodies to the limit for the sake of success justified by our personal mantra: "only the tough succeed", "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger", "work more and you'll achieve more". Especially when it comes to sleep and performance our mental attitude is simply wrong.

According to former Harvard professor and world-renowned neuroscientist, Matthew Walker, lack of sleep (defined as anything less than 8 hours!) not only demolishes your immune system, doubles the risk of cancer, determines whether you will develop Alzheimer's, and shortens your life span: It also negatively impacts your own and your team's performance. Eye-opening, isn't it?

Lack of sleep...

**1. Reduces your leadership effectiveness**

Since the appearance Daniel Goleman's seminal work, we all know about the importance of EQ (emotional quotient) for effective leadership. In one study, employees were asked to rate their boss' leadership effectiveness on different days. Those days when the employees reported that their boss exhibited poor self-control and short temper always coincided with a bad night's sleep, as reported by the boss. What's more, on days when the boss slept poorly, the employees themselves, even if well rested, became less engaged throughout that working day. Another study measured a 60% increase in emotional reactivity in individuals who were sleep-deprived. They progressed from "irritable and antsy, to punch drunk giddy and to vicious negativity". Regardless of how high your EQ is, lack of sleep will significantly reduce it, and thus impact your leadership effectiveness.

**2. Gets in the way of building relationships**

Reading emotional signals via facial and bodily cues is a key skill in communicating effectively and thus building relationships. In one of his studies, Matthew Walker demonstrated that a group of sleep-deprived participants who were given cards with various facial expressions could not distinguish one emotion from another with accuracy. Moreover, they tended towards negative interpretations, even describing somewhat friendly looking faces as menacing. By comparison, the well-rested control group could judge expressions with accuracy. So, if you read people's emotions wrongly, how can you establish trust-based and close relationships with employees, your boss, your clients?

**3. Undermines brilliant problem-solving**

Brilliant problem solving requires creative and innovative thinking. Matthew Walker claims that the dreaming phase of sleep in particular produces some of "the most revolutionary leaps forward in human progress". How? During this phase your brain is able to examine a current problem utilising the entire back catalogue of your life's experiences. When you wake up next morning with a brand-new solution to a previously intractable problem, you know it was the dreaming phase at work. For that to happen you need enough sleep.

**4. Makes you lazy and less motivated**

Sleepy employees are not just unproductive: They regularly select less challenging tasks. They take the easy way out. This not only impacts individual performance - imagine the negative impact this behavior can have on morale in a team environment.

**5. Lowers your learning curve**

Continuous skill development, especially in this more and more agile business world, is key to performance. Conventional wisdom says: practice makes perfect. What Matthew Walker found though, is that it is not so much the practice alone, but the sleep you get afterwards, that makes you perfect. In one of his experiments he asks individuals to type

a number sequence on a keyboard with their left hand (like learning a piano scale) and practice this for 12 minutes. Their performance improved with practice. 12 hours later, he tested the participants. One group had 8 hours sleep, the other did not. The well-rested group showed a 20% jump in performance speed and near 35% improvement in accuracy. The same goes for memorising information.

**How can you ensure you get your 8h of sleep so you can perform at your best? Here is what Matthew Walker suggests:**

- **Natural performance peak: early afternoon** – Do your most important tasks around this time (e.g. SteerCo presentations, meetings with boss or CEO, delivering touch performance feedback)
- **Avoid alcohol before bed and caffeine and certain teas after 2pm** (Caffeine has a half-time of 5-7 hours!)
- **Avoid large meals and drinks** (The digestive process can disrupt your sleep)
- **Remove screen technology from bedroom** (e.g. iPad reading at night suppresses 50% of melatonin release which you need to fall asleep.)
- **Keep the bedroom cool (18.3 degrees Celsius is ideal) and dark**
- **Stick to a sleep schedule:** Establish regular bedtime and wake up times even on weekends
- **Relax before bed** (Will help you reduce adrenaline/noradrenaline levels)
- **Go to bed only when sleepy** (Never lie awake in bed for a significant time period.)
- **Reduce anxiety-provoking thoughts and worries** (by learning to mentally decelerate)
- **Remove clock faces from view in the bedroom** (prevents clock watching anxiety at night)
- **Exercise at least 30min per day** (no later than 2-3 hours before bedtime)

It is time to change the way we treat our bodies. For too long we have ignored the connection between body and brain performance. Slowly companies are picking up the wisdom of sleep (e.g. P&G, Nike, Google offering sleep hygiene courses, flexible working hours, sleeping pods etc.) Sleep is one of the most important ingredients for performing well and staying healthy.

Back to the dinner party. By the time dessert was over, I had succeeded in irritating a few dinner guests with my pro-sleep comments. Anyway, by then it was 10pm. Time for me to get home for my 8 hours sleep.

Source: Walker, Mathew. *Why We Sleep*. London: Penguin Books, 2018.