

## Want To Build A High Performing Team? Start With Better Sleep

Matthew Smith

Contributor

*I write about emerging trends in leadership and talent development*

Professionals have heard a steady drumbeat of messages about the health benefits of sleep for years. Despite all the evidence, these messages seem to be landing with about as much force as a parent nagging their teenager to “eat your veggies.”

For too many people, getting high quality sleep is just another habit that we know is good for us, but just seems too hard to put into practice in the face of many competing demands on our time. Multiple studies bear out the pervasive nature of sleep deprivation in the workplace. A 2018 study from Potential Project showed that [68% of non-executive leaders got between five to seven hours sleep per night](#). A 2022 survey by U.S. News and World Report found that [only 13% of people usually wake up feeling rested](#). An earlier study by McKinsey & Company found that [66% of business leaders were dissatisfied with how much sleep they were getting](#).

Researchers have now demonstrated the impact that all this grogginess has not only on individuals’ health and wellbeing, but on their ability to lead effectively and build high performing teams. It turns out that the key to fostering psychological safety in organizations may start with leaders finally following the advice to get more and better sleep.



Two-thirds of leaders are dissatisfied with the amount of sleep they get.

GETTY

PROMOTED

## Why Sleep Matters for Professionals

If the only consequences of poor sleep related to a person's own health, then individuals and companies could be forgiven for treating it purely as a personal choice. So what if your boss likes to stay up late bingeing Netflix, as long as they show up and do their job the next day?

The reality is that failing to get sufficient sleep can lead to a cascade of effects that not only make us feel physically tired, but lead to significant declines in our cognitive and interpersonal performance that can spill over into our work. From an evolutionary standpoint, our bodies respond to lack of sleep as a trigger that we are under threat. This leads to the activation of our sympathetic nervous system, the release of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, and the down-regulation of metabolically expensive functions such as executive function and mental control to ensure we have enough fuel to either run away from or fight whatever threat we are facing.

Importantly, our body's stress response does not distinguish between types of threat; if it senses a reason to react, it will. As University of Queensland research fellow and founder of BioPsychAnalytics Consulting Jemma King, Ph.D., puts it, "Our evolutionary ancestors only missed sleep for good reasons, like to hunt or if they were being hunted. We still house the same stress responses and neural architecture in our modern skulls today."

What happens when this stress response kicks in? In simple terms, we lose full access to many of the faculties that are required to perform at a high level in modern professional life. "Research shows that sleep deprived individuals are less likely to trust others and be cooperative, and are more likely to be selfish," says King. "They have a shorter term focus and a reduced capacity to hold several concepts in their working memory." One recent study demonstrated that [sleep loss interrupted the normal human urge to help others](#), as a result of the deactivation of the parts of our brain that prompt prosocial behavior.

Michelle Elstein, founder of Courageous Co., a leadership coaching and consulting business, notes that sleep can have a significant impact on emotional flexibility. "If your emotional availability and flexibility is compromised then it is very challenging to be present without judgment. You may be easily distracted, short in attention span, impatient, and less able to suspend any kind of bias or judgment."

Els van Der Helm, Ph.D., a sleep neuroscientist and author of a forthcoming book on sleep and performance for busy professionals, adds: "The combination of the 'IQ' and 'EQ'

functions both deteriorating makes it even more tricky for leaders. It's not just that you are having trouble weighing the pros and cons of a situation; it's also harder to manage your own emotions and your interactions with others at the same time."

How much sleep loss does it take for these effects to kick in? Less than most people would likely think. A recent study conducted by King and her colleague Nadia Fox with a group of executives found that for every 45 minutes of sleep debt accumulated (as measured by a Whoop fitness tracker), they experienced a [5-10% decline in performance on tasks requiring mental control](#) the following day. Mental control is the ability to suppress reflexive responses and choose wise actions, a core skill for anyone engaging in complex problem solving or managing interpersonal dynamics. As King dryly notes, "Being 10% more stupid the next day is pretty significant in a super competitive world."

## **The Impact of Leaders' Sleep on Team Performance**

In addition to the impact on individual performance, new research led by King and Fox has uncovered a powerful link between leaders' sleep and the level of psychological safety on their teams. Psychological safety — defined by Dr. Amy Edmonson as "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" — is a well-established pillar of high performing teams. Google famously found through its Project Aristotle that psychological safety was the single most important factor separating its highest performing teams from the rest.

To measure the effect of sleep on psychological safety, King and Fox equipped executives with Whoop devices that measured their sleep (including duration, timing, and stages) along with other biomarkers such as heart rate variability. At the same time, they conducted weekly surveys of these leaders' direct reports to measure their perception of psychological safety within their team. They found that team members reported [significantly lower levels of psychological safety in their teams on days when the leader had a high level of sleep debt](#).

The team members did not have any way of knowing how well their boss slept the prior night, so what explains this correlation? "Humans are very good at subconsciously detecting the stress status of their team or clan members," notes King. "Stress is highly contagious. If people detect cortisol, they become more vigilant, less open, and more reactive." In other

words, if the leader is suffering the effects of lost sleep, not only will their team notice, but they will change their own behaviors in ways that reduce the psychological safety of the entire group.

“You can’t hide your stress state,” says King. “If a leader is under stress, everyone on the team will think, ‘I need to be careful today.’”

## Sleep Habits to Build High Performing Teams



Leaders who treat wellbeing as a foundation of their effectiveness can achieve significant ...

[+]

GETTY

The connection between sleep and psychological safety may be the tipping point that convinces more leaders to take sleep hygiene seriously — and build organizations that value sleep as part of a high-performance culture. In order to make this change, sleep experts suggest a few critical steps.

Foster the mindset that wellbeing drives leadership effectiveness

Leaders make time for what they value. Therefore, a good place to start is to shift one’s own mindset about sleep — and other domains of wellbeing such as nutrition and stress management — recognizing that improvement in these areas can have a profound effect on

one's effectiveness as a professional. The more effectively leaders manage their physiology, the more likely they will be able to operate at their peak at work.

"Leaders often underestimate how impactful their health and wellbeing are to being effective personally and in their leadership," notes Noémie Le Pertel, Ph.D., an executive resilience coach and founding chair for the Economics of Wellbeing and Global Human Flourishing Network at Harvard University. "We need to make the mindset shift to view *wellness* behaviors as *leadership* behaviors."

In a similar vein, King suggests: "You have to lead yourself before you can effectively lead others. Be aware that you may be less tolerant, more critical, have reduced situational awareness, and have a more negative perspective if you are sleep deprived."

### Build effective personal sleep habits

Once a leader values sleep and recognizes the link to performance, the next step is to change sleep habits in a way that is effective and sustainable. Each person's context and sleep needs are unique, but experts recommend a few basic best practices for anyone looking to improve their sleep:

1. **Think quality, not just quantity.** Not all sleep is created equal. Deep, slow-wave sleep flushes toxins from our brains, while REM sleep is critical to the "mental filing" functions that help declutter our brain. A sleep tracker can help baseline how much deep and REM sleep a person is getting and measure the impact of any behavior changes on sleep quality.
2. **Aim for consistency.** Having a consistent sleep schedule can be just as important as the number of hours that you sleep. Research from Whoop shows that [maintaining a consistent sleep and wake time can improve the quality of sleep](#) by supporting our body's natural circadian rhythm. This helps us get more efficiently into the restorative REM and deep sleep states.
3. **Create a routine that is conducive to consistent, quality sleep.** Create an ideal sleep environment with a cold (as low as 60 degrees Fahrenheit and no higher than 70 degrees), dark, and quiet bedroom. Avoid screens as much as possible in the evening. Avoid high intensity exercise in the four hours before

bedtime. Dr. King recommends, “be super disciplined about what you let into your brain and your eyes at night.”

4. **Manage light exposure and stress throughout the day.** The quality of our sleep is influenced by a range of factors that begin much earlier in the day. Getting some natural light as soon as possible after waking helps set the body’s circadian rhythm and ensures that sleep hormones are released at a consistent time. Stress that accumulates unmanaged throughout the day can result in rumination at night that both prevents sleep onset and leads to more fragmented, restless sleep.

### Recognize that you may be the last to know if you are off your game

One of the hardest things for leaders to accept is that they are the least likely to know whether their own performance is being diminished by lack of sleep. Ironically, the very functions that are inhibited when we are in sleep debt are the ones that help us be mindful, present, and fully aware of the impact we are having on others.

Even worse, we cannot even rely on our own subjective feeling of sleepiness to know whether we are impaired. Van der Helm warns that the signs of sleep deprivation can be misleading. “Research shows that when you’re getting six hours sleep each night, after 10 days you’ll end up performing as poorly as someone who pulled an all-nighter. The key difference is that the person pulling the all-nighter feels subjectively way more sleepy than you, and this helps them know to avoid tasks they aren’t fit to do at the moment.”

How can leaders escape this trap? One strategy is to use a sleep tracker or other device that provides objective data about sleep quality and quantity to adjust our behavior. One night of bad sleep can be managed, if a leader accepts that they may be impaired and takes steps throughout the day such as mindful breathing before meetings to manage their body’s natural stress response. If the leader is suffering from more acute sleep deprivation (defined as three days or more with less than 60% of their sleep need met), King suggests they should consider “stepping away from the machinery” and avoid making any major decisions as much as possible until they can have at least one night of high quality sleep.

## Reset the team culture to embrace wellbeing

Perhaps the most exciting opportunity that emerges from the latest sleep research is the ability to build more high-performing, resilient workplace cultures that embrace sleep as a foundation for effective team functioning and personal performance. The negative cycle — bad sleep leading to diminished functioning leading to low psychological safety — can be reversed into an upward spiral. Cultures that glorify overwork can be replaced by those that value the performance and psychological safety that comes from effective personal and team wellness habits.

The key ingredient is leadership role modeling. Le Pertel notes: “The best thing you can do as a leader is to take care of yourself. Work on your own wellbeing so that others can flourish.” Leaders who openly discuss the importance of sleep, both in the context of employee wellbeing *and* as a driver of high performing teams, can foster deeper psychological safety and create positive pressure for effective team habits.

Even hard-nosed, performance-oriented cultures such as those found in military special forces units and consulting firms have begun to embrace the power of sleep to unleash new levels of potential in individuals and teams. “Elite knowledge workers need to pay attention to their cognitive fitness, just like an elite athlete needs to pay attention to their physical fitness,” says King. “You can have all the leadership concepts in the world, but until you have your physiology under control, it will come back to slap you.”

*Follow me on [LinkedIn](#). Check out my [website](#).*

DL=0