



Center for Creative Leadership

LEADING Effectively e-Newsletter

unlock leadership potential

One Sure-Fire Way to be a Better Leader

An interview with Jessica Payne, Ph.D, Harvard Medical School and University of Notre Dame

Jessica Payne can guarantee better performance at work. No, she's not pitching a new management tool or trying to drum up sales for a game-changing product. She just wants you to sleep.

That's right. Sleep.

Payne is a neuroscientist who runs the Sleep, Stress and Memory Lab at Notre Dame and studies the effects of sleep (or lack of sleep) on the brain. She's found that sleep sets the brain up for crucial functions the next day. Not surprisingly, better cognitive functions boost your impact at work.

Payne is currently working with CCL to help understand how current brain research might influence leadership development. She recently spoke with us about the power of sleep.

CCL: What's new about sleep?

JP: On some level, I'm not telling you anything that you don't already know — you need to manage your stress and you need to get your sleep! I think people do know that they don't function as well when they don't get the sleep they need. What they don't know is that they are missing out on so much that would benefit them.

It turns out the quality and quantity of our sleep influences everything from memory function, to positive and negative affect throughout the day, decision-making, innovation, a whole host of creative processes that are extremely important to the business community.

When I talk to executives, I show them hard-core scientific evidence that I hope convinces them that sleep is not optional. I point out that they are working hard, dealing with complex issues, but they aren't as efficient as they could be if they weren't fighting against the brain's natural tendencies.

CCL: What happens when we don't get enough sleep, besides feeling cranky or sluggish?

JP: Sleep and stress are intimately connected. Stress wreaks havoc on our physical, emotional and cognitive health. Our system is designed to switch on in reaction to a stress — to get us out of harm's way — and then switch off again. But we're living stressed lives where that switch gets stuck in the "on" position and the

Each month the Premium subscribers of *Leading Effectively* have access to an interview with a thought leader, author or expert. Through these interviews, we offer different perspectives on topics related to leadership. Featured in the April, 2012 issue was neuroscientist Jessica Payne, who runs the Sleep, Stress and Memory Lab at Notre Dame.



system breaks down. Sleep — and restorative breaks like short naps or meditation — helps our stress response to switch off.

When you are awake, your eyes are open; you're listening; you're busy with work and family. You're constantly barraged by information. Your brain is constantly acquiring new things and encoding them. If you don't sleep well or take restorative breaks, you have less of a chance to go offline and process that information. If you don't process it, you won't remember it, or see connections, or transform it in ways that might be useful to you.

When you sleep, your brain is actually very active. In some stages of sleep, your brain is more active than in wakefulness. It is busy processing emotions, memories and finding connections among the various things that you've taken in during the day and weaving it in with things that you already know.

So, past a certain point, working harder by working more is actually very ineffective. It makes a whole lot more sense to capitalize on your body's natural desire to sleep. If you want to be on the cutting edge, if you want to have novel ideas, if you want to have incredible, inferential ability and insight, then you need to let your brain go "offline." High-quality sleep is best, but even naps during the day or getting out of office, taking a walk, or doing a five-minute meditation actually changes your neurochemistry in a way that helps you process information.

CCL: Even if we know we need more sleep, it's hard to do. How do you convince people who are extremely overbooked to actually get more sleep?

JP: Right, getting people to change their behavior is a big problem. I try to give people the facts and try to do it in a convincing and positive way. I try to steer people past this notion that's deeply embedded in our culture in the U.S. that sleep is a waste of time or that the need to sleep is a weakness. If you really probe people, that's what they think.

This is a profound misunderstanding of sleep! Sleep has been preserved across all species and across evolutionary time. If it was really not necessary, it would be selected out. Because clearly, if you were awake a lot longer there are some things you would do more of ...

CCL: On the other hand, sleep is simple. We don't have to learn a whole other thing ...

JP: Exactly. Adding more information and putting more demands on the brain is actually antithetical to what you should do. Sleep isn't one more thing you have to do. It doesn't cost more; you don't have to take any medication. You don't have to train more, sign up for extra classes. You have to do something your body does naturally - you just need to be more responsible about it.

CCL: How much is enough sleep?

JP: Don't ever let anyone tell you that you need eight hours of sleep. That's the average, but that's like saying the average women's pant size is a 10 or a 12, so that's what everybody should have. But people are naturally bigger or smaller. Likewise, the eight-hours-of-sleep recommendation is overly simplistic.

Most adults need between seven and nine hours of sleep. Some may need 10, some can get by on five, but that's exceedingly rare. You need to figure out what you need. If you need more sleep than the average, don't feel guilty about it. If you need less, don't worry.

The fastest way to figure out how much sleep your body really needs is to take a two-week vacation where you can get lots of sleep! The first week isn't going to be normal. You'll probably sleep too much because you've accumulated a sleep debt, or you'll have a hard time calming down and relaxing. That second week will give you a good idea of what you really need. At that point, if you only sleep six or seven hours and you wake up feeling really refreshed, then that's how much you need. If you are sleeping eight hours, you need eight hours.

CCL: Given that most of us can't make a two-week vacation happen any time soon, what can we do immediately to start getting the cognitive benefits of sleep?

JP: Start going to bed and wake up at the same time every single day. Do it for one month and see how you feel. That will give you a good idea of how much sleep you need. Or go to bed just 20 minutes earlier - and do it consistently.

CCL: So a little bit more sleep makes a difference?

JP: Absolutely! Sleep 20 minutes more and see how much better you feel. I believe everybody can find 20-30 minutes of extra sleep each day.

People argue with me and say, "I just can't sleep more; I simply don't have the time." That's where I challenge their thinking. If you own up to how valuable sleep is, it is more important than doing that extra thing. It's even more important than spending an extra half hour with your child, when it means that the next day you'll be a better parent.

When I work one-on-one with people, I get them to think about their impediments and how can we get around them. For each person it's different. A high-powered executive might sleep in the car if he/she has a driver, or fit in a 20-minute nap during the day.

Anything you can do to get enough sleep will help your brain function optimally, and will surely improve performance, make you more productive and help you feel much better.