

Don't stress out

Sleep is one of the simplest and most effective ways to counter workplace strain and be a better executive

BY DEBORAH PENTA

Leadership doesn't exist without stress. Over the past several years, many studies have been conducted that discuss the areas of stress relevant to leadership and how stress impacts the effectiveness of leaders. The Center for Creative Leadership is one such organization that conducted a study in 2007 that specifically deals with this issue.

The Center found that 80% of the leaders studied reported that work is a primary source of stress and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress. More than 90% of the leaders studied said they manage stress by temporarily removing themselves, either physically or mentally, from the source of their stress. And, the Center found that most of the leaders used a variety of sensory pursuits, or physical stimuli, to manage stress.

The study indicated that leaders believe that demands which include long and frequent meetings, organizational bureaucracies, travel and increased workloads contribute to increased daily stress.

As a leader, managing stress is one of the most important things you can do in an effort to stay focused, alert, motivated and productive. While there are a myriad of things you can do in an attempt to lessen the way you are feeling and reacting to stress, the bottom line is that you are the only one who can fix the problem and take control of your stress and gain greater control of your life.

Several months ago, I attended a lecture given by Mark Liponis, M.D., medical director of Canyon Ranch and co-author of the best-seller "Ultra-Prevention" and author of "Ultra-Longevity." Dr. Liponis discussed the road to a younger, healthier life and his revolutionary new paradigm which includes a seven-step program that gives us the opportunity to live a healthier life and slow down the aging process. In listening to him speak and after reading his books, I found it fascinating that his step three—sleep—is one of the simplest things we can do to improve our immune system and lessen our stress so that we are more alert and have the ability to tackle daily stress with greater ability.

When "60 Minutes" Correspondent Leslie Stahl reported on the "Science of Sleep" this past spring, it further endorsed what Dr. Liponis is suggesting. Stahl interviewed Matthew Walker, the director of Sleep and Neuroimaging Lab at the University of California Berkeley. Walker shared a study they conducted on rats where they kept them awake indefinitely and after just five days, the rats died. How many leaders are operating on less than eight, seven or even six hours of sleep and continue to pack their calendars or their "must accomplish lists" only to start their days exhausted and be ineffec-

tive; not to mention the increased risk of disease.

Charles A. Czeisler, a professor of sleep medicine at Harvard Medical School, in an edition of the Harvard Business Review called "Sleep Deficit: The Performance Killer," examined in a thought-provoking manner how sleep deprivation is an extremely serious hindrance to leadership performance and how it has executives trying to figure out how to get it all done in less hours a day as—many times—senior leadership is forced to function without a good night's sleep.

Increased sleep may indeed be the most powerful thing we can do immediately and easily to help us become more effective in leadership roles. Our ability to cope with stress, react to challenging situations, concentrate and be more productive, happy and balanced is a benefit of a good night's sleep.

In the book "Power Sleep," James Maas says, "To be a peak performer you need to be fully alert, dynamic, energetic, in a good mood and cognitively sharp. You must be able to concentrate, remember, make critical and creative decisions, communicate persuasively and be productive all day long. None of this is possible without quality sleep."

According to James Maas, 100 million Americans are sleep-deprived. Are you?

We'd like to know your thoughts. Please email me at dpenta@femaleleaders.org.

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