Dream a Little Dream: Managing Sleep Deprivation Risks

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Our ambitious 24/7 lifestyles, filled with unbalanced diets, low physical activity, excessive electronic media use, and psychosocial stress, are causing a precipitous decline in our sleep. But the safety implications of sleep deprivation have been known for decades. Precipitating causes of the Three Mile Island nuclear incident (1979), the Exxon Valdez oil spill (1989) and the Space Shuttle Challenger tragedy (1986) include sleep loss and sleep-related disorders.

According to a Rand Corporation study, the steep price tag of economic losses in the U.S. stemming from workers who receive inadequate sleep are a whopping $411 billion a year. The Rand study and similar research published in SLEEP, the official publication of the Sleep Research Society, describe direct health costs associated with sleep loss that include sleep disorders, productivity loss, and premature death. Additionally, organizations may face rising costs from increased absenteeism, pre-absenteeism (where employees are at work but working at sub-optimal levels), nonmedical accident costs and reduced well-being.

Unfortunately, nonprofit employees prioritize cramming as many items as possible into the day without thinking about the potential repercussions sleep deprivation may have on their productivity and health. Nonprofit leaders should consider the broader risks that arise when employees attempt to ‘burn the candle at both ends.’ The costly consequences of lack of sleep not only effect the people on which a mission depends, but also threaten the health and well-being of the organization. Nonprofit leaders are in position to change the culture of their organizations from one that rewards sleep-deprived individuals to one that embraces fatigue risk management.

Defining Fatigue and Fatigue Risk Management

Fatigue risk management aims to enable and empower employees to perform at adequate levels of alertness. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) provides a helpful definition of fatigue: “a physiological state of reduced mental or physical performance capability resulting from sleep loss, extended wakefulness, circadian phase, and/or workload (mental and/or physical activity) that can impair a person’s alertness and ability to adequately perform safety-related operational duties.”

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center views fatigue risk management as an evolving strategy for cultivating employee wellness to optimize performance as well as individual and organizational well-being. The ultimate

goal is to create awareness about the benefits of sleep and downside risks of sleep deprivation. A secondary goal is to ensure that the organization's policies and values are in sync and also support the healthy workplace and healthy workers your mission requires and deserves.

Start Me Up!

Fatigue is a complicated issue that can be managed and reduced but is hard to completely eradicate. Here are some tips for instilling the principles and protocols of fatigue risk management in your nonprofit workplace.

- **Gather insights from a diverse team.** As is true with any complex or complicated risk on your radar, gaining the broadest possible perspective on the issue helps ensure the practicality and durability of your plan and increases the odds your strategies will be based on a holistic view of the issue. Consider using surveys and facilitated conversations as you gather data and start formulating a plan. Keep in mind that team members who are invited to participate in the early stages are more likely to become champions of the effort in the long term. The following are possible question prompts that you can customize to elicit ideas and concerns about fatigue:
    - To what degree does fatigue—lack of adequate sleep—impact your focus, creativity or productivity in the workplace?
    - Have you ever been concerned about the impact of fatigue on co-workers or team members?
    - What do you believe are some of the top causes of sleep deprivation—for you and others?
    - How often do you feel pressure to skip breaks, meals, or work long hours that exceed your normal work schedule?
    - In your experience, what are the safety implications of sleep deprivation?
    - To what degree do the managers and supervisors in your functional area or department model our nonprofit's values related to taking breaks and working reasonable hours?
    - What changes in policy or practice would make a positive impact on our goal to ensure that all staff are well rested and equipped to do their best work?
- **Create a simple, discrete plan.** Upon recognizing the dangers of sleep deprivation and fatigue, some leaders may want to tackle the issue with a comprehensive, ambitious approach. Given the myriad safety issues that are likely to emerge from internal risk assessments, give yourself permission to start small, with a straightforward, manageable and modest plan. Resolve to evaluate the outcomes from any new activity, learn as you go, and add to your approach incrementally.

Implementation Tips

To build momentum around a new fatigue risk management strategy, it is important to take action after soliciting and receiving employee input. Below we present ideas for building a fatigue risk management program and sustaining the interest and participation of your team. These building blocks were inspired by resources on managing fatigue risk from the National Safety Council:

- **Educate and train staff** to be aware of the risks and provide guidelines on how to manage fatigue. Prioritize rest and breaks and offer specific suggestions about managing fatigue during working hours. For example, remind staff about the telltale signs of fatigue: excessive yawning, irritability, bloodshot eyes, poor performance, forgetfulness, lack of focus, slow response time, and micro napping (involuntary four to five second naps). Offer tips for minimizing fatigue, such as limiting caffeine intake after lunch.
- **Adopt sleep-savvy practices.** One simple but effective work practice is to encourage and incentivize staff to get up and move throughout the day. Staying seated and sedentary drains creativity and inspires drowsy desk work. Help staff increase alertness and clearer thinking by encouraging them to visit co-workers located in different parts of your building or campus when questions pop up, rather than relying solely on email, instant messaging or an intercom system. Invite your team to collaborate in designing an *up and moving* challenge activity or other healthy routines as alternatives to afternoon caffeine boosts. Additional practices include:
    - Consider flexible work hours with options for the morning larks (approximately 40% of the population) and night owls (30% of the population). Morning larks, who prefer to wake up with the rising sun, will be most productive earlier in the day. Night owls show their true performance potential in the late afternoon and early evening.
- **Mitigate fatigue** through a positive workplace environment. Certain environmental factors can cause undue physical stress on employees which contribute to or exacerbate fatigue. Environmental controls like temperature, light, air quality, and noise level can have an effect on the fatigue felt by staff. For

example:
    - Promote alertness with a moderate temperature, bright lighting, clean air and a quiet working environment.
    - Promote short breaks throughout the day by setting up comfortable, phone-free break areas that are located away from the busiest and nosiest part of your office. Encourage all staff to visit the break area anytime they need to gather their thoughts or take a breather.
    - Consider allowing short naps, especially for staff required to work long shifts. According to the National Sleep Foundation, 20 minutes is all that is needed to provide "the benefits of napping such as improved alertness, enhanced performance, and a better mood."
- **Collect data and monitor the benefits of managing fatigue risks.** Elicit feedback from employees about the work environment (lighting, noise, etc.), organizational policies, and the degree to which managers and supervisors are modeling sleep-savvy behaviors. Update incident reporting forms to ensure that the issue of fatigue as a causal factor is considered when reviewing incidents and near-misses.

Fight Fatigue

Research on the costly consequences of fatigue in the workplace should inspire the resolve to fight fatigue. Nonprofit missions require creative, alert, well-rested team members. Nonprofit leaders who encourage breaks and ample rest can expect to reap the rewards of sound sleeping teams.

Fatigue Risk Management Resources

- *Why We Sleep Unlocking the Power of Sleep and Dreams*, by Matthew Walker
- "Five Ways to Prioritize Sleep and Wake Up a Better Employee," by Rachel Montañez, forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2017/11/29/five-ways-to-prioritize-sleep-and-wake-up-a-better-employee/#6bcec6fd7249
- "Why sleep matters—the economic costs of insufficient sleep," by Marco Hafner, Martin Stepanek, Jirka Taylor, Wendy M. Troxel, Christian Van Stolk, RAND Corporation, rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1791.html
- "The Economic Cost of Inadequate Sleep," by David Hillman, Scott Mitchell, Jared Streatfeild, Chloe Burns, Dorothy Bruck, Lynne Pezzullo, SLEEP, https://academic.oup.com/sleep/article/41/8/zsy083/5025924
- National Sleep Foundation – https://sleepfoundation.org
- National Safety Council, Fatigue – nsc.org/work-safety/safety-topics/fatigue
- "Sleep and Sleep Disorder," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, cdc.gov/sleep/index.html
- "Risks of Sleep Deprivation: Get Your Beauty Sleep for Safety," RISK eNews – https://nonprofitrisk.org//resources/e-news/sleep-deprivation/

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