How Sleep Deprivation Can Cause Unethical Behaviour

Key Concept
Are your employees working longer hours? This is the case with most organizations today. Look deeper and you might find that they are sleep deprived as a result. This Idea suggests that such sleep deprivation can lead to more unethical behaviour at work, but there may be a simple, short-term solution: a cup of coffee!

Idea Summary
Recent years have seen a surge in 'unethical' behaviours in the workplace, whether in the form of corporate scandals, fraud, or just disrespecting company values. As management research has focused on the drivers of such behaviours, increasingly sleep deprivation has come up; recent studies have found that sleep deprivation can deplete self-regulatory resources, which can in turn lead to increased unethical behaviour. This is concerning because employees appear to be working more hours every year, and this trend is expected to continue in the near future. Consequently the numbers of hours these employees are sleeping are decreasing.

Researchers including Michael Christian from Kenan-Flagler Business School set out to examine this further, as well as the effects of two moderators: caffeine and social influence. Their findings were published in the Journal of Applied Psychology. Focusing on deception in particular, they concluded the following:

- Caffeine has a significant moderating effect on sleep deprivation and depletion of self-regulatory resources.
- The relationship between sleep deprivation, depletion and deceptive behaviour is weaker for those who drink caffeine than for those who do not. In other words, ingesting caffeine can reduce the effect that sleep deprivation can have on unethical behaviours.
- The relationship between sleep deprivation, deception and deceptive behaviour is significantly stronger when social influence is present.

“Our research shows that sleep deprivation contributes to unethical behaviour at work by making you more susceptible to social influences, such as a boss who tells you to do something deceptive or unethical,” says Christian. “Caffeine can help you resist by strengthening your self-control and willpower when you’re exhausted.”

Methodology: In order to test their hypotheses, the researchers recruited and assigned 229 undergraduate students to two groups which they studied over two days. All participants were kept awake overnight, but the next day, one group was given caffeinated chewing gum with the equivalent amount of
caffeine as can be found in a 12-ounce coffee or 16-ounce energy drink.

They then all completed tasks, in which they were encouraged to send a deceptive rather than truthful message, so that the researchers could assess whether ingesting caffeine influenced the decision to act unethically or not.

**Business Application**

So do these findings suggest organizations should supply and encourage the consumption of caffeinated products? In theory, yes, but the researchers also point out that any benefits must be carefully balanced with the well-documented negative effects of caffeine too; excess consumption can increase anxiety, act as a diuretic, lead to withdrawal symptoms including headaches and fatigue, etc.

A better solution is for organizations to discourage excessively long hours at work through scheduling, overtime restrictions, and frequent breaks. Similarly, they can avoid scheduling tasks that require a great deal of self-control when deadlines make long hours unavoidable. Finally, workplace napping can be accommodated and encouraged, as well as sleep awareness training.

“We need to develop awareness about the negative effects of sleep deprivation,” says Christian. “Cultures can reinforce the myth that working hard and working well involves not sleeping, but our research shows yet again that sleep deprivation isn’t good for the individual or the organization.”

**Further Reading**


**Further Relevant Resources**

David T. Welsh's at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management
Aleksander P. J. Ellis's profile at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management
Michael S. Christian's profile at UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School
Ke Michael Mai's profile at the University of Arizona Eller College of Management
UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School Executive Education profile at IEDP