

Give Yourself a Break – How Rest Boosts Innovation

by Shelley Dunstone

Have you noticed how people who take regular holidays seem happy and fired-up with energy, whereas those who don't seem a bit weary and jaded?

There's something about taking a break that puts things into perspective. When you come back from your holiday, work seems easier and more manageable.

Rest is essential for high performance of body and mind. Sleep somehow balances the body, helping it to maintain its ideal weight. For body-builders, rest is an important part of the training regime. It's during the rest period that the muscles grow. Sleep keeps us sane, allowing the brain to absorb and make sense of the day's events. Sleep deprivation is a well-known method of torture.

Despite the regenerative properties of rest, we often insist on pushing ourselves beyond exhaustion. When I was a junior lawyer, we worked on some complex and urgent litigation cases. The partner I worked for would stay up all night, drafting and re-drafting documents, and expected everyone else to do the same. At the time, I accepted that this relentless slogging was the way to succeed. It is natural to emulate our successful role-models. But as time went on, I began to realise that sleep has a lot going for it! I would go to sleep on a difficult problem, and when I woke up in the morning I had found a ne and better way to approach it.

Leonardo Da Vinci knew the value of seeing things in perspective. He said:

“Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer; since to remain constantly at work will cause you to lose the power of judgment. Go some distance away because the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony or proportion is more readily seen.”

How can we build the benefits of rest into innovative thinking?

- Encourage your people to work sensible hours and to relax with diverting hobbies. Refreshed minds think more creatively.
- Instead of dismissing an idea as impossible, sleep on it, and possibilities will start to develop.
- Be realistic about deadlines for solving problems. To get an innovative solution you have to look beyond the obvious, and inspiration will not necessarily strike you when you demand it.
- Adjourn a discussion and come back to it at a later time, to see what ideas people have come up with.

- Have a notebook to jot down interesting ideas that come to you at unexpected moments.
- Recognise that taking a break isn't giving up, being lazy or procrastinating. After you have thought hard on a problem, your subconscious will keep working on it for you.