

Executives sleep more than the people they lead — and are the most exhausted, new survey of 1,009 US leaders finds

Nine in ten leaders (89%) made an important business decision on six hours of sleep or less last month. Ten years after a landmark study, the share of leaders short of sleep has not measurably changed — and the most senior are the most likely to hide it.

NEW YORK, 6 October 2026 — Senior executives get slightly more sleep than the managers below them, are more satisfied with it, and have more freedom to protect it. They are also the most exhausted people in the organization, the most likely to hide it, and the most likely to make important decisions on too little sleep. That is the central finding of The Sleep Intelligence Report 2026, a survey of 1,009 US managers and executives published today by sleep neuroscientist Dr Els van der Helm, alongside her article on the findings in Harvard Business Review.

Nine in ten leaders (89%) made an important business decision on six hours of sleep or less in the past month; half (52%) did so four or more times. Among senior leaders and executives, 57% did so four or more times.

More sleep at the top, and more exhaustion

By every measure of how much they sleep, senior managers and the C-suite are better off than team leads and middle managers: 6.9 hours on a weeknight against 6.7, 83% satisfied with the amount of sleep they get against 65%, and 76% saying their organization lets them prioritize sleep against 61%. By every measure of depletion, they are worse off: 54% finish the working day mentally or physically exhausted always or often, against 37%; 52% deliberately hid how tired they were from colleagues four or more times last month, against 36%. The two groups are the same age on average, and the pattern holds within every age band.

The concealing and the deciding are largely the same people. Senior leaders who regularly hide their tiredness (four or more times last month) are far more likely to be regularly deciding on too little sleep: 81% made important decisions on six hours or less at least four times, against 30% of those who hide it less.

"Every board I know has a succession plan and a risk register. Almost none has asked whether the people making its decisions are in a state to make them," said Clarke Murphy, CEO Emeritus of Russell Reynolds Associates and author of Sustainable Leadership. "Half of the senior leaders in this survey are finishing the day exhausted, and most of them are hiding it. That is a risk management question, not a wellbeing one."

Ten years on, the trackers arrived and the sleep did not follow

The survey repeats questions from a 2016 study of leaders by Dr van der Helm and Nick van Dam, published in McKinsey Quarterly and Harvard Business Review. In 2016, 43% of leaders were not getting enough sleep at least four nights a week; in 2026 the figure is 39% — no measurable change. The share who say a lack of sleep has little or no effect on how they lead has held at nearly half (48%, against 46%). What did change is the technology: fewer than 5% of leaders mentioned a sleep tracker in 2016; today 68% track their sleep. Leaders who track their sleep regularly are no less likely to be short of it than those who have never tracked (39% against 38%).

"When we published in 2016 we assumed awareness would do a lot of the work. It has done almost none," said Prof. dr. Nick van Dam, co-author of the 2016 study and Director of the IE Center for Corporate Learning & Talent Management at IE University. "The same share of leaders is short of sleep, the same share thinks it does not affect them, and the only thing that has really changed is that they now have a device to tell them what they already knew."

What leaders allow, and what they praise

The report identifies two conditions leaders set for the people around them, and finds they work on different things. What an organization allows shows up in how much sleep its leaders get: where it does not allow people to prioritize sleep, 51% of leaders are short of sleep four or more nights a week, against 35% where it does. What an organization praises shows up in whether people admit to being short. Six in ten leaders (60%) say that in their organization running on little sleep is read as a sign of commitment; where it is, 94% hid their tiredness last month, against 57% elsewhere — although they sleep no less than anyone else.

Permission, the report finds, works below the top and stops there. In both tiers, leaders who are allowed to prioritize sleep do sleep more. Below senior level they are also far less exhausted (27% against 53%). At senior level, exhaustion, concealment and decisions on too little sleep do not measurably change. And the pattern is not confined to large corporations: every finding holds from organizations of under 250 employees to more than 10,000.

"For the last six months I have grown increasingly alarmed by the state of depletion with which senior leaders arrive at my global leadership programs. We have a self-care crisis in the C-suite, and no one feels permission to stop, reflect, rest or restore," said Amy Elizabeth Fox, CEO of Mobius Executive Leadership. "Senior leaders are very good at authorizing things for other people. What this report shows is that the permissions they have signed off on are protecting their organizations and not reaching them."

"For ten years organizations bought the visible things—the apps, the trackers, the webinars—and almost all of it was aimed at the individual," said Dr van der Helm. "Sleep was never something leaders were taught to lead. The conditions that decide whether people can recover are set by leaders, and this survey shows those conditions have not moved."

A tool for leaders

The report includes the Recovery Check, a three-part check for leaders: four questions to ask yourself, the observable signs of a colleague who is short of sleep, and an anonymous five-question team pulse benchmarked against the 1,009 leaders surveyed. The full report, data appendix and a chart pack will be available for free from Tuesday October 6th at www.elsvanderhelm.com/download. Reach out now to receive early access at media@elsvanderhelm.com.

Additional comment

Further comment from contributors to the report, each on the finding they respond to. All quotes are approved for use.

On senior leaders sleeping more and hiding more

"Our 2018 research showed that senior leaders sleep more than everyone else. But this research shows that while they might get more sleep, they're more likely to hide it when they are tired versus the people below them," said Rasmus Hougaard, Founder and Chairman of Potential Project and author of the 2018 HBR article that first found leaders sleep more than everyone else. "Despite many of them wearing sleep trackers now, it's clear it's the culture that needs to change."

On cultures that praise little sleep

"My research has shown that leaders who signal sleep is something to sacrifice have employees who sleep worse and behave worse," said Christopher Barnes, Professor of Management, Foster School of Business, University of Washington. "This survey shows the other half of it: those cultures do not get more hours out of their leaders. They get a performance of sacrifice, and a lot of people hiding how tired they are."

On what organizations allow

"We focus on our people's wellbeing, we build high-performing teams, and many of us are using trackers. Those efforts can help, but they are only one part of the picture. Culture that supports the prioritisation of sleep will also contribute to stronger outcomes," said Marc Borggreven - Global Human Capital Leader, PwC.

On the tracker on the wrist

"Awareness has never been higher, and almost every leader can tell you last night's score. Far fewer can tell you what they changed because of it, or how a poor week of sleep showed up in the way they led their team. That gap is what erodes leadership capacity: the physical and cognitive capacity to keep learning, and to apply what you know under constant pressure," said Annastiina Hintsa, CEO of Hintsa Performance.

On the blind spot

"What I find fascinating is the disconnect between what leaders experience and what they believe it does to them. More than one in three leaders who are short of sleep most nights say it has no impact on how they lead. But we know from the research that sleep loss also makes us worse at judging our own performance. That is why the people around a leader often see the impact before the leader does. It is a blind spot," said Alyson Meister, Professor of Leadership and Organizational Behavior, IMD.

Notes to editors

Methodology: Censuswide surveyed 1,009 US managers and executives—from team leaders to the C-suite, in full-time employment with people-management responsibility—online between 3 and 19 August 2026. The 2016 comparison draws on a survey of 196 leaders published by Nick van Dam and Els van der Helm in McKinsey Quarterly ("The organizational cost of insufficient sleep", February 2016) and Harvard Business Review ("There's a Proven Link Between Effective Leadership and Getting Enough Sleep"). Only questions asked with identical wording in both years are compared. Full distributions for every question, overall and by seniority, are in the report's data appendix. Charts may be reproduced with attribution to the report.

Dr van der Helm is available for interview in person in New York from Monday October 5th to Thursday October 8th (morning), and by video from Monday October 12th onwards.

About Dr Els van der Helm

Els van der Helm, PhD, is a sleep neuroscientist who works with global organizations to improve performance through sleep. She conducted her research at the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience and at Harvard Medical School, and as a Fulbright scholar studied the impact of sleep on the brain and performance while pursuing her PhD in psychology at UC Berkeley, before becoming a management consultant at McKinsey & Company. She is an adjunct professor at IE University in Madrid and a lecturer at St. Gallen and IMD Business Schools and has been named one of the world's top five sleep experts by Thrive Global.

Her book, [*Sleep Intelligence: The High-Performance Blueprint for Sharper Thinking*](#), will be published by Dutton (Penguin Random House) on 12 January 2027 and by Transworld in the UK on 14 January 2027.

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Interviews, embargoed pre-briefings, the full report, and the chart pack are available on request.