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RESEARCH BRIEF

Poor Sleep May Fuel Conflict at Work, Especially up the Hierarchy

Poor sleep may interact with hierarchy to increase the likelihood of interpersonal conflict. That is the claim of a new study of U.S. Army soldiers by Professor Brian Gunia of Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, along with Paul Bliese of the University of South Carolina and Amy Adler of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. They find that sleep problems were associated with more interpersonal conflict at work, and the effect was most pronounced for conflict with higher-rank individuals. The study suggests that this pattern may reflect the self-control required to manage conflict with senior colleagues, combined with the fact that poor sleep weakens that self-control.

Why it matters

Interpersonal conflict is costly for organizations because it disrupts collaboration and can undermine morale and performance. This study suggests that promoting healthier sleep is one organizational lever that may help reduce conflict, especially in hierarchical settings where employees are expected to exercise restraint in interactions with senior colleagues.

The findings also suggest that supporting healthy sleep may do more than improve wellbeing or alertness. It may also reduce the risk that fatigue turns into conflict with higher-ranking colleagues as well as other problematic behaviors requiring self-control.

How we know

The paper uses multiple studies and analyses from U.S. Army samples. It begins with a preregistered pilot study testing people's intuitions about sleep, conflict, and rank, then reports a primary survey of 480 enlisted soldiers using generalized linear mixed-effects models to examine conflict with higher-, same-, and lower-rank colleagues. The authors also ran a cross-lagged analysis in a separate sample of 1,116 soldiers to examine directionality, analyzed open-ended descriptions of negative events from 2,721 soldiers, and reanalyzed additional measures from the Army dataset to examine conflict-management strategies and other indicators of self-control.

What researchers found

- **Sleep problems were associated with more conflict overall:** In the primary Army survey, soldiers with more sleep problems reported more frequent disagreements at work.
- **The association was strongest upward:** Sleep problems were more strongly linked to conflict with higher-rank colleagues than with same-rank or lower-rank colleagues.
- **Hierarchy changed the pattern:** When sleep problems were low, conflict was low across rank levels. However, when sleep problems were high, conflict with higher-rank colleagues rose most sharply.
- **Self-control is the authors' proposed explanation:** The authors argue that conflict with higher-rank colleagues requires more self-control because workplace norms strongly discourage it, and that sleep problems compromise that self-control.

What this means

- **For managers:** Supporting healthy sleep may help reduce conflict with supervisors, especially in hierarchical teams where restraint matters most.
- **For CHROs:** Sleep should be treated as part of conflict prevention and effective management of human resources, not just a wellness issue.
- **For organizations in high-stakes settings:** Fatigue-related conflict may be especially costly where teamwork and safety depend on disciplined behavior.

Now what?

- Review workload and scheduling practices that may be undermining employee sleep.
- Set clearer norms around after-hours communication and rest expectations — for example, by adopting policies that protect employees who choose not to respond to work-related messages outside standard working hours.
- Use sleep-supportive leadership practices to communicate the importance of sleep and help employees protect rest and reduce fatigue-related conflict.
- Treat sleep as part of broader conflict prevention and safety strategy, especially in hierarchical settings.

LINK TO THE STUDY

For more, see: Gunia, B. C., Bliese, P. D., & Adler, A. B. (2026). Sleep and Strife: The Effects of Sleep on Conflict within Organizational Hierarchy. Academy of Management Discoveries. https://doi.org/10.5465/amd.2026.0031