Work Dreams

Surprise: Dreams about your job can help your performance

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS THERE'S NO ESCAPE FROM work. You spend all day tackling difficult assignments, discussing strategies with co-workers and negotiating contracts over the phone. Then it's home for a quick dinner, family obligations, and finally, blissfully, it's bedtime—your one chance to find peace in the dreamy landscape of sleep. Or so you hope. Too often the day's woes begin all over again in your dreams. Vivid, sometimes Technicolor images of co-workers appear, and problems that you masterfully circumvented at the office play themselves out in bursts of melodrama that make *Knots Landing* seem tame. Is there a reason for these nocturnal replays? Or are dreams, as some theorists contend, simply the flotsam and jetsam of an erratic but active sleeping brain? And if dreams do have something to teach us, can we learn to use their messages to improve our waking lives?

Most psychologists believe that dreams reflect the day's activities or rehash unresolved emotional issues in an effort to make sense of them. Therefore, if you've spent six hours at a computer keyboard, you may well find yourself inputting data during your dreams. Similarly, if your boss has upset you or perhaps reminds you of your father, with whom you have a difficult relationship, "the boss" may make an unwelcome appearance in a dream. Fears of being unprepared or unequal to a task, losing control over a work project or blowing up and being fired are common themes in dreams that deal with work. Sometimes these dreams may mean just what they seem to mean—that you *are* out of control at work—but they aren't necessarily about work alone. The out-of-control dream could mean you're feeling lost in your personal life, and if your work is somewhat troubled too, the fears may get bundled together and packaged in work imagery. Dreaming about being fired may reflect a real fear about your job status, but it could also express feelings of inferiority.

Despite the prevalence of pop-psychology books that attempt to give pat explanations for certain dream symbols (a snake is a penis; water, the unconscious), it's not so easy to glean meaning from dreams, or even to recognize that their sometimes fantastic plots are really about the day's work. The confusion arises because dreams are the mind's private language, expressed in metaphor and imagery. There is no Oxford Dictionary for the language of dreams, no definitive definitions, no proper spellings. Each individual holds the key to deciphering her own dream lexicon. "What's important is becoming familiar with your dreams and the images in them," explains Jayne Gackenbach, a leading dream researcher and psychology instructor at Athabasca University in Canada. "Then you can begin to associate different meanings with those images."

For example, here's a work dream of Gackenbach's: "A night or two ago, I dreamed that I had to tap-dance in front of an audience and I was trying to get dressed for the performance. In the dream, I'm concerned about what I look like. When I thought about what the dream meant, I realized that it reflected my recent emphasis on having fun in my personal life at the expense of my work. In fact, I'm behind in my work because I've been playing too much. The dream called attention to my anxiety."

One of Gackenbach's clients works in the composition room of a newspaper. She dreamed that she was on a platform watching whales with two elderly men, who objected to her presence. "On the surface," Gackenbach explains, "the dream had nothing to do with work, but when I asked her what elderly men she knew, she mentioned the men at work who were being laid off one by one because they didn't want to learn the new computer system that the newspaper was installing. She had learned the system, and they resented her for it."

Making connections between dream images and the various experiences in your waking life is often difficult and can best be achieved with someone's help, especially someone well-versed in the language of dreams. Marie-Louise von Franz, a famous Jungian analyst, once said, "You cannot analyze your own dreams; you cannot see your own back." In the last two decades, lay groups of dream-conscious individuals have sprung up across the country. They keep dream diaries, chart personal dream symbols and regularly meet to discuss each other's dreams. In addition, a number of psychologists have evolved techniques and programs geared to helping people understand and use their dreams'

messages to improve their waking lives. One of the most popular dream therapists is Gayle Delaney, director of the Delaney & Flowers Dreams Center in San Francisco and author of several books about dreams, including *Living Your Dreams*. Her clients include "lawyers who work out touchy contracts in their sleep, corporate managers and executives who identify problems and devise solutions via their dreams, and public-relations people whose dreams lead them to creating new programs."

Dreaming creatively is nothing new. Elias Howe discovered how to make his sewing machine in a dream. Robert Louis Stevenson came up with the idea of transforming Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde during a dream. Chemists have unraveled complex chemical structures, and mathematicians have solved formulas while dreaming. As D. H. Lawrence is said to have remarked, "It is very queer, but my dreams make conclusions for me."

Even a few corporations are in on the act, attempting to boost productivity by helping their employees harness the problem-solving power of dreams. One large chemical corporation in India improved the creativity of its research scientists by enlisting Indian management trainer and dream worker Francis Menezes to teach the researchers how to use their dreams to get ideas. He had them keep dream diaries and do creative-thinking and relaxation exercises, and gave them phrases to focus on before going to sleep that were intended to help them solve problems in their dreams. After several months, the scientists began to see positive results. After Menezes finished his training, they continued to study and analyze their dreams in smaller groups.

Most people, it's safe to say, have never been able to use their dreams to solve problems or boost their creative energy because they don't remember or don't pay attention to their dreams. It's a simple habit to break. "If you regard your dreams as important and take time to recall them," writes dream expert Patricia Garfield in her popular book *Creative Dreaming*, "they will come to you more easily and more often." *(Continued)*

Dreams: From Dishes to Dollars

JUST AS WAKING EXPERIENCES CHANGE, SO TOO DOES THE CONtent of dreams. That holds true for shifting cultural roles. Before large numbers of women entered the work force, studies found that women's dreams tended to be set indoors, in domestic situations, while men's involved office or outdoor settings. Men faced many strangers and challenging tasks in their dreams; women negotiated the stresses and strains of the familiar. But that seems to have changed, at least for women who have stepped out of the traditional female role. According to a recent unpublished study conducted by Diane Handlin, a clinical psychologist in Plainfield, N.J., these women's dreams have become more like those of men. They involve adventurous, risk-taking activities and commonly pose challenges that the dreamer must meet. Handlin notes that "there are no longer many kitchen or household themes in the dreams of nontraditional women." **—J.B.**

To learn to recall and interpret dreams, say Garfield and other dream researchers, first prepare for the dream. Tell yourself before falling asleep that you will remember your dreams. Keep paper and pen nearby to record them soon after waking, or use a tape recorder. Then, when you wake after a dream, keep quiet, perhaps closing your eyes again in order to let your mind drift back to the dream.

Once you have successfully recorded a number of dreams, you can begin to examine the meaningful images in them. Like Gackenbach's client who dreamed of watching whales, you may find that colleagues and tensions at work appear and reappear. Perhaps even more interesting, once you become adept at recalling your dreams, you may be able to choose a work problem to dream about in order to resolve it (see below).

Not everyone will be able to solve problems or better understand a difficult work relationship by listening to her dreams, but, as clinical psychologist Diane Handlin puts it, "we're all moving through problems in our dreams. To some extent, our lives are a mystery, and people are asking, 'Who am I?' Because dreams are uncensored material, it's very helpful to look into them and see what direction they are pointing us toward."

WORKING YOUR DREAMS It may seem like the ultimate abuse of the Puritan work ethic to try to come up with creative solutions in your sleep. But when all else fails, why *not* ask your dreaming mind to help? The process dream workers use to target a problem is called incubation. They focus their thoughts on what they want to dream about before they fall asleep and then record their dreams, analyze them and see if any helpful information appears. Sometimes it does. According to Delaney, there are six steps for incubating dreams:

1. Be sure that the first night of your dream work is one on which you get a full night's sleep, and that you have time in the morning to record your dreams.
2. Write down the feelings and activities that took place earlier in the day, including anything upsetting or important.
3. Jot down the issue you would like to dream about. Describe the problem and how you will benefit if it is resolved.
4. Write a short phrase expressing what you want to understand about the issue.
5. After you turn off the light and close your eyes, repeat your incubation phrase over and over in your head. As your mind begins to wander, bring the phrase back into focus.
6. When you awaken, write down whatever thoughts are in your head, or your dreams, if you remember them. Then see if anything there addresses the problem or issue you posed the night before. **—Jane Bosveld**