

Nodding off on the job: How not to pull a Cheney

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Another bleak meeting about another disaster proved too tiresome for U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney last week.

As his boss droned about the desperate state of California's wildfire region, Mr. Cheney slowly shut his eyes and tipped his head forward in a gradual narcoleptic arc.

One camera caught a full five seconds of slumber.

Mr. Cheney may have his share of detractors, but on this count he surely deserves compassion. He certainly is not the first underling to succumb to meeting-induced somnolence.

In a recent CareerBuilder.com poll, 49 per cent of male workers and 35 per cent of female workers admitted to falling asleep on the job at least once.

"It's a normal thing to nod off if you're bored at a meeting," business etiquette consultant Lynda Goldman said. "But it's a pretty major faux pas."

The vice-president could learn a few things about feigning wakefulness from those in the working world who don't have a nuclear arsenal at their disposal.

When Ms. Goldman feels her eyelids getting heavy during a meeting she pretends to be taking the official minutes. "I'll try to write down what everyone is saying," she said. "Otherwise, I might drift off and miss something."

She also suggests downing a coffee or taking a brief walk outdoors before meetings.

"Caffeine definitely works," said Jonathan Fleming, co-director of the sleep program at UBC Hospital in Vancouver. "Most people don't realize that caffeine takes 40 minutes to be absorbed. You have to plan ahead."

One commenter on a blog who wrote about Mr. Cheney's drowsy episode expressed disappointment. "And I thought Dick was a corporate animal," C. Morris wrote. "Even I learned to sleep with my eyes open in a meeting."

Other meeting pros suggest a short, painful jolt to shake off lethargy, such as biting your lip or poking your palm with a pencil.

But these tricks offer only a short-term mask for the problem.

Overseas work cultures long ago figured out a remedy to the midday lull. In China, the law guarantees a snooze after lunch. In Spain, Italy and Greece, some towns virtually shut down for an afternoon siesta.

The age-old custom has solid science behind it. Most of us hit a natural circadian nadir between 2 and 4 p.m.

"Even if you get all the sleep you need, there'll be a low in the afternoon," said Charles Samuels, medical director at the Calgary-based Centre for Sleep and Human Performance. "It has nothing to do with food."

Even if the White House were to install a siesta room, Mr. Cheney may need more help. Last year, he fell asleep during a press briefing by U.S. President George W. Bush and Chinese President Hu Jintao.

With a medical history that includes multiple heart attacks, obesity and elevated cholesterol levels, he quite likely suffers from fitful sleep.

"Judging by his body habits and his jowls, I'd guess he probably has sleep apnea," Dr. Fleming said. "He's not a well man."

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