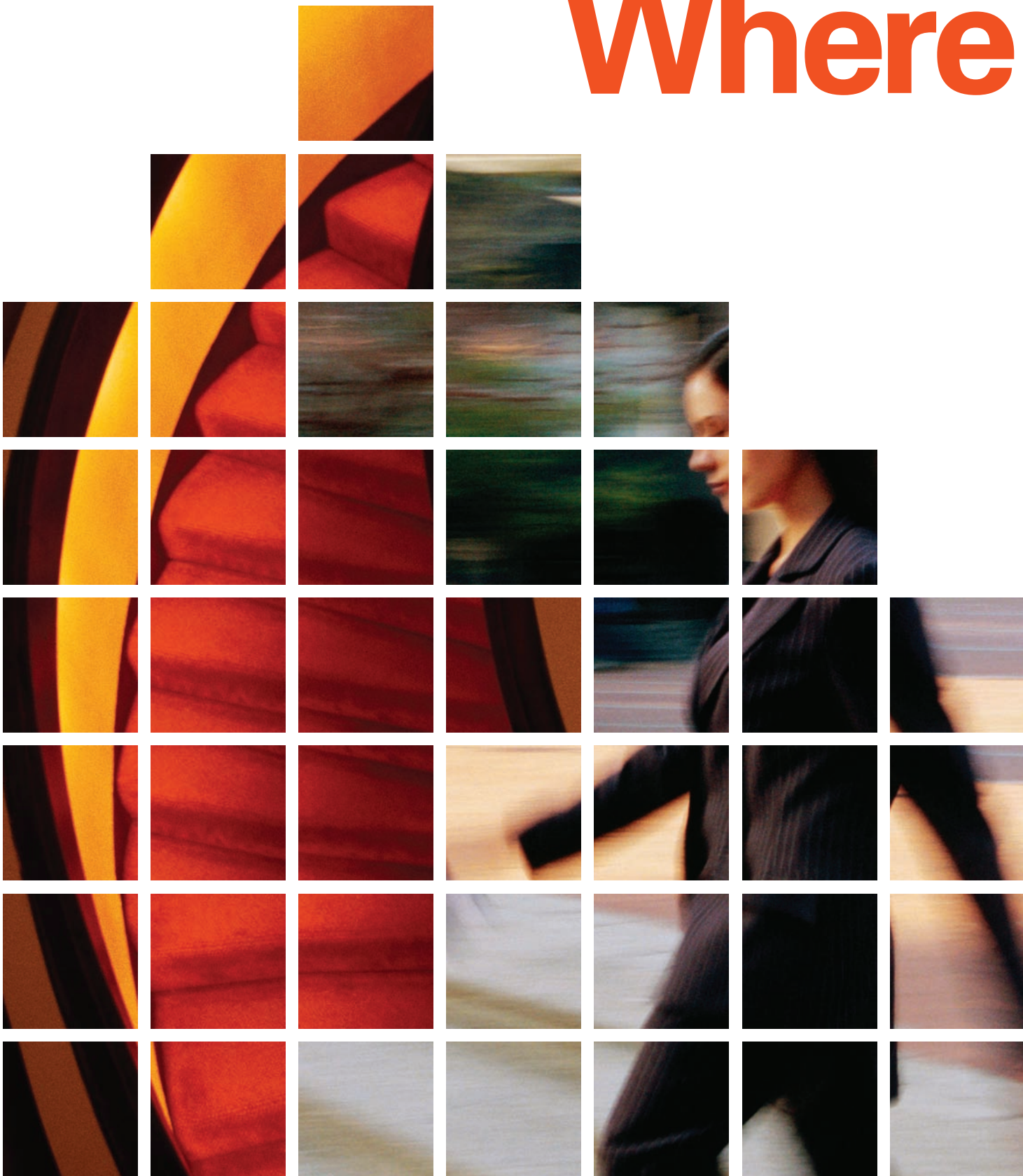


Where



Are The Stairs?

Managing Workplace Stress

BY ELIZABETH BLACK

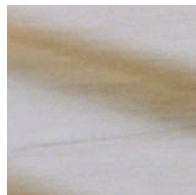
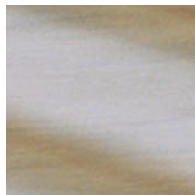
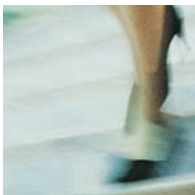
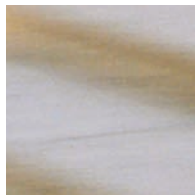
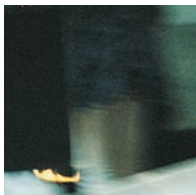
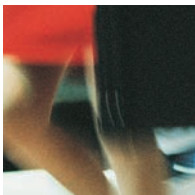
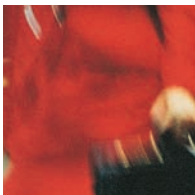
It was 4 pm on one of *those* Mondays. 4 pm with ten items added to my To Do list since 8:30 am that morning, my direct manager needed to leave for the airport a half hour ago; my husband text messaged to say he couldn't make it to the day care center to get our son, even though it was his day to do so, and as I replied to his message, I made a sharp left turn out of the copy room, stopping just short of bumping into a well-dressed gentleman who, after helping me avoid our human collision, said in the calmest voice I'd heard all day:

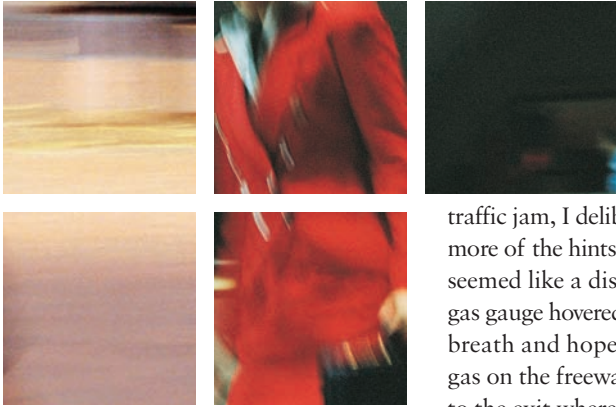
"Excuse me. Do you know where the stairs are?"

Maybe it was the crescendo of the day, or maybe I was just in one of those moods, but I burst out laughing as I realized I didn't have a clue where the stairs were. I knew every bank of elevators— which ones stopped at the even floors and which ones stopped at the odd floors, but...

where exactly were the stairs? It seemed like a most bizarre question. The man— I'm guessing he was a manager for one of our big suppliers— smiled and eventually took the elevator I pointed him toward. For the rest of the day and while I was picking up my son, making dinner, keeping it ready for my husband who was **also** late for dinner, I was baffled by the gentleman's question— where **were** the stairs?

After I finished dinner, played with our son, bathed him and put him to bed, I had an hour to think as the television in the background droned on. It was then that I realized just how exhausted and stressed I





was. Maybe some of the ideas I heard about last week in the lunch time seminar on managing stress were worth considering.

Exercise Doesn't Mean Going To The Gym

One of the messages I recalled was the idea that building exercise into my daily routine would help get rid of the chemicals that built up in my body as stress increased. They said that physical activity released endorphins that had a calming effect on the body. I remembered thinking that I got enough physical activity walking from the copier to my desk and to and from my car. There's no exercise like lifting a 25 pound child in and out of the bathtub, either. However, I thought that I don't really get much exercise during the most stressful time of my day— inside the office. Maybe the extra activity I got at home did take some of the stress away. Perhaps I could take the stairs rather than the elevator between floors. I still needed to find them, but as I nodded off to sleep, I decided to go find those stairs tomorrow.

Control What You Can— Let Go Of the Rest

The following day, as I drove in to work and was caught in the usual traffic jam, I deliberately tried to remember more of the hints for managing stress. They seemed like a distant memory now. As the gas gauge hovered near empty, I took a deep breath and hoped that I didn't run out of gas on the freeway. "Please, let me make it to the exit where I know there is a gas station," I said out loud to no one in particular. If only I had left 45 minutes earlier, I could have avoided this mess and perhaps even had time to grab more than a coffee at the lobby coffee bar.

The seminar leader had asked us to make a list of all the things we had direct control over in our lives. At the time, I thought my list would be pretty short, but as I thought more about it, I decided there were many things I could control. For example, despite what my mother always said about having a kitchen floor clean enough to eat from, I couldn't remember a time, in living memory, that my family ever wanted to eat off the floor. So why was I

making myself crazy each night sweeping and then mopping the kitchen floor and the bathroom floors, too, just because I had the mop out? I was coming around to realize that not every clean up chore had to be done every night, and my family wouldn't get dreadfully sick.

While I was on that train of thought, I remembered the discussion in that seminar about asking spouses to pitch in with the household chores. I'm lucky in that department, I thought. My husband offers quite often to do routine chores around the house. However, I rarely take him up on his offer. "Why is that?" I muttered. No, he doesn't get the bathroom to sparkle or fold the towels like I would, but who is to say that my way was the only way it could be done? Could I live with "roughly right" (my husband's) housekeeping as I would if our son colored the tree blue? Fortunately, I didn't have to answer my own question at this critical juncture, since the gasoline gods were with me and I now needed to concentrate on choosing the least expensive gas I could find at this gas station.

The first test of my new-found interest in coping with stress came as I entered the building. Do I try to find those stairs or do I head to the elevators, hoping for a five-minute reprieve before the reps converge at my workstation, each wanting help with a task or assistance with something urgent? Stairs it was... I was on my



way to a stress-free existence—or at least maybe losing those extra “dessert pounds.”

Delegation Doesn't Require A Staff Of Ten

After climbing four flights and only having to stop on the landings at the second and third floors to catch my breath, I made it to my area, not really sure if I bought into that endorphin thing. However, true to my expectations, there were three people waiting to ask me to help them with their projects. As I told each of them that I would come to their desks to help them in fifteen, 30 and 40 minutes respectively, to give me time to unpack my bag and to get a cup of tea, my mind went back to another idea that seminar leader had—delegation. She called delegation “the best key to managing time.”

While I remembered little about the techniques of delegation she recommended, I did remember I had that “self talking” thing going on again. “Just who does she think I can delegate to,” I said to myself. I don't have a staff of ten and, most people delegate to me.” However, when we had the opportunity to talk to the person sitting next to us in the room, I do recollect that my partner had a different spin on delegation. She said she looked for ways to divide the work tasks so that her team could be more efficient. One example that might work here was how she and a co-worker agreed that while she was great at meeting planning and arranging internal conferences, her co-worker wasn't. Her co-worker was much better than she at

analyzing sales data. Since they both shared the support for one team, these two individuals got together and rearranged their support tasks to play to their interests and strengths. What if I talked to the other admins on this team and thought through how we might rearrange our tasks to maximize our efficiency?

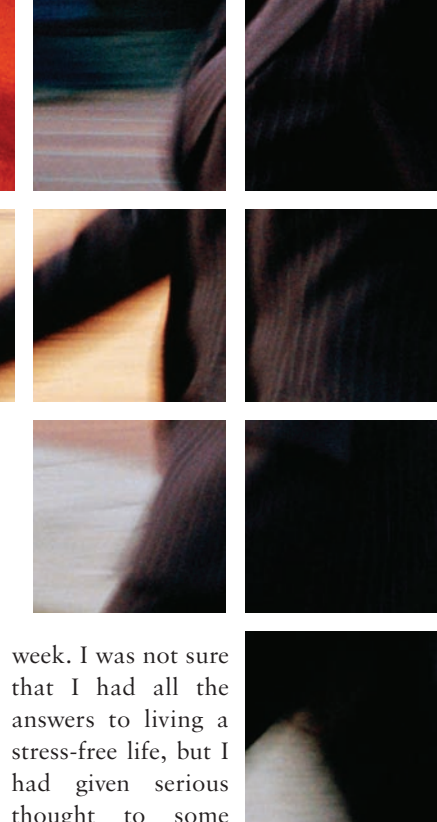
I guess that's delegating, but it would also take a great deal of stress off each of us since we would not be worried about doing the best we could with tasks that we were not experts at.

Along the same lines, I thought about asking the receptionist if she could sort and deliver the mail each morning rather than just putting it all in a pile on my desk. I thought she would agree if I could explain that none of the reps really gave her additional growth opportunities since they didn't really know her and opening and sorting their mail would give her an opportunity to learn about their areas of responsibility. I then remembered the caution from our seminar leader—“delegation doesn't mean dump.” I knew that there had to be something in this for our receptionist and I did believe that she would welcome getting to know the reps and their jobs.

As I walked to meet with the rep whom I agreed to meet in fifteen minutes, I also decided to try another “stress-buster:” not to agree to do everything for everybody. Now if I could just keep remembering this part!

Just Do It!

I spent the rest of my day answering phone calls, scheduling appointments on the master calendar, working on projects and greeting visitors. As I cleared my desk for the evening, I sat still for ten minutes to reflect on the first few days of this



week. I was not sure that I had all the answers to living a stress-free life, but I had given serious thought to some changes I could make to reduce the number of tasks I took on and the way I performed them, both at work and at home. I knew that habits were hard to break and that I would really have to be self-disciplined to carry through with these new ways of behaving, but I would try. After all, if I could soon make it up four flights of stairs without stopping, if I could ignore the drips of orange juice that were spilled on the floor at breakfast and if I could coordinate work tasks with others, maybe I would see some of the benefits of managing my stress. At the very least, I should have more time with my husband and our son doing the things that really mattered. And for that reason alone, I made a commitment to “just do it.”

Elizabeth Black is a former VP of Human Resources, an IAAP member and President of AdminForum, a firm specializing in professional development workshops for administrative support staff. For more information on AdminForum workshops, visit their site at www.admin-forum.com.