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Opinion: Don't always play it safe

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"Stay safe!"



THE ADVANTAGE GROUP
Mary Gardner is executive director of The Advantage Group.

We have used this phrase over and over in the past two years to wrap up everyday conversations. Meanwhile, in our professional lives, we have had to leave our safety zones as we balanced new relationships between work and home and challenged our own paradigms about what was important. We have become disruptors in our own lives by engaging in creative new ways to accomplish tasks that had long been formalized.

In the moment it was challenging, but it also allowed us to see through new lenses. It forced us to find the courage to define what was most important to us and to prioritize it.

I am reminded of a time when I volunteered in a fifth-grade classroom to teach the principles of supply and demand economics. I asked the students if they would accept a lawn mower as a gift if they lived in an apartment without a lawn. Of

course, the most obvious answer would have been a resounding "no" as it would have been of no use to them.

However, they answered differently. They provided me with a long list of how they could still use the lawn mower: Mow other people's lawns for a fee, rent it out, or even just sell it for parts. Their reasoning wasn't bound by the obvious. I started to wonder, when was it that we stopped being creative and just began accepting defined solutions?

For most individuals, their careers have been an intentional choice. This is rarely the case of someone in the insurance industry. More often it is an accidental career – a choice that evolved from an opportunity presenting itself.

It is a highly regulated and systemically controlled industry. This is a great industry to play it safe. Those who dare to cast off from the safe harbor of traditional practices are few and far between. But there is no singular business model for success, so it can be an even greater industry to be inspirational in thought and action.

As I reflect on my career, I realize I owe many of my successes to seeking change and taking chances. Each time I accepted or sought out a new role, I found myself tapping into or developing a new skill. As my career progressed, I found myself actively seeking new challenges and forcing myself to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. I learned to follow in the steps of my mentors, sponsors and other successful individuals who did not play it safe. They leaned into creativity and embraced change. They gave themselves permission to think, "What is possible?" and they radically embraced their "why."

I believe that we need to embrace the younger version of ourselves, to celebrate our inner fifth grader who sees not just a few defined possibilities, but a laundry list of opportunities. We need to call on that confidence within ourselves to bet on a good outcome.

This year, I was fortunate to become the executive director of The Advantage Group, an insurance agent group of 16 owner-member agencies serving the Pacific Northwest. As I work with our

members to define our group's next steps, I am reminding us all to continue to be bold and brave but never to lose track of our "why."

So, be safe, but don't always play it safe!