



## EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

### **2021's 10 Most Valuable Lessons from Advisors and Business Owners**

Key insights shared by some of the top independent advisor interviews curated from the last 12-months of the series

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

Welcome to the latest episode of our podcast series for financial advisors. Today's episode is 2021's 10 Most Valuable Lessons from Advisors and Business Owners. It's an annual culmination of the top commentary from breakaways who were guests on the series.

I'm Mindy Diamond and this is Mindy Diamond on Independence.

This podcast is available on our website, [diamond-consultants.com](http://diamond-consultants.com), as well as Apple Podcasts and other major podcast platforms.

If you are not already a subscriber and want to be notified of new show releases, please subscribe right on your favorite podcast platform or on the episode page on our website.

For Apple podcast users, I would be grateful if you'd give the show a review—your input helps us to make the series better and alerts other advisors, like you, who may find the content to be relevant.

And while you're at it, if you know others who are considering change or are simply looking to learn more about the industry landscape, please feel free to share this episode or the series widely.

For many advisors and business owners, 2021 was a year to remember. Despite a pandemic that refused to morph into a memory, record breaking revenues in the wealth management industry prompted a positive outlook amongst many—and served as proof that with creativity, initiative and determination you CAN move forward.

In the 46 episodes that we launched in 2021, all those qualities and many others were demonstrated by our guests, the breakaway advisors in particular. Yet it was a common thread that weaved a story line throughout:

That is, the desire to serve clients with the very best of their abilities—and the “pull” or strong attraction towards something better.

Most expressed the need for greater control and to remove any possible limitations and conflicts—and to give them unrestrained ability to do more for clients.

And several of our guests even left the big firms they built their businesses in amidst a global health crisis to achieve their goals.

So in this annual digest of some of our best interviews of the year, we take a step back to glean the key lessons shared by advisors who demonstrated unstoppable determination and whose stories contained valuable and relatable lessons for all.



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What drove them to make a change? Are they able to achieve all they set out to? And ultimately, are they able to serve their clients and grow their businesses without limitation?

They answered all that and more...So let's get to it...

**Mindy Diamond:**

We often talk about the “pushes” such as bureaucracy or limitations that drive advisors away from their firms, and the “pulls” or motivations toward something better.

And one guest truly demonstrated both in his conversation with my partner Louis Diamond.

Matt Kilgroe, a \$1.2B UBS breakaway, found he was hitting a wall in what he could do for his clients.

And the more he learned about the independent space, the more he was drawn to being a business owner—and removing the constraints that were limiting him and his team from achieving greater control over their business.

So in June of 2020, amidst the pandemic shutdowns, Matt and his team launched Cydeo Wealth Management in St. Petersburg, FL with Dynasty Financial Partners and Fidelity.

Louis asked him about that decision...

**Louis Diamond:**

What drove you to leave UBS in the first place? I recall you guys were growing like crazy, and clearly were making a ton of money. And, could have stayed, been extremely successful and done great work for your clients.

**Matt Kilgroe:**

Well Louis, I would use a term that I've heard Mindy and yourself use a number of times, that there were pushes and pulls. The pushes to leave UBS and pulls to go the independent space itself.

The pushes from UBS ... First of all, I would never say anything negative about the wire houses, either Merrill Lynch or UBS. But, the industry and the dynamics there were really changing, and getting to a point where we just felt like we couldn't grow the way we wanted to. The day-to-day things that were happening in the corporate environment were frustrating to us. I could go into a number of different examples, I think most of your listeners probably are in tune with things that happen where you don't have any control. And, I think the number of things that were frustrating us on a day-to-day basis were growing all the time. Those were the pushes.

But, I think the pulls were even more strong for us. We looked at the opportunity and the ability to be a true fiduciary for our clients, to look at their situation financially on a holistic



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basis, and be able to look at everything that they had. I can get into some of the details in a minute, but we were excited about that part. We were excited about being able to have a variety of services and products that we could use, not just tied to one company like UBS. I think that one of the things that we recognized was there's this triangulation of services that has always been there. You custody your assets some place, you deliver advice, and then you deliver products and services to your clients. What we found is that, at the wire houses, that's all in one place. That doesn't necessarily serve the client the best way necessary or possible. When you're independent, you can custody where we like. In our case, Fidelity and Schwab, I'm sure we'll talk about that a little bit more. The advice has always been coming from us, the financial advisors and the wealth management team, so the advice is coming from Cydeo. And then, products and where products are manufactured can come from anywhere. It really sets us up to be able to do the best job for the client, and that's a big reason of why we wanted to be independent.

**Mindy Diamond:**

It's that ability to have untethered access to do more for clients that so many breakaway advisors share.

Gerry Goldberg, CEO and co-Founder of GYL Financial Synergies and partner John Yolles grew their business to some \$4B in assets under advisement while employees of Wells Fargo Advisors and eventually Wells Fargo FiNet, yet wanted to be free of a large broker dealer construct and ultimately to be true fiduciaries—that is, to gain the ability to do more for their high net worth and institutional clients and offer products and services beyond the standard solutions.

So they decided it was time to explore their options and in 2016 launched the RIA firm GYL Financial Synergies in partnership with powerhouse investor, Focus Financial Partners.

And just five years later, they've grown their assets to \$8.5B and tripled their revenue.

So I asked him how independence compares with the access that top advisors have at the big brokerage firms.

**Mindy Diamond:**

If I'm an advisor, let's say, and I'm with Merrill PBIG or UBS Private Wealth or Morgan Stanley Private Wealth. So these are the top of the food chain folks. These advisors really believe that they have access to anything and everything that a high net worth client or institutional client, mid-market institutional clients could need. What would you say to that? Do you agree with that?



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**Gerry Goldberg:**

I would say that at the end of the day, the devil is in the details. In our experience, we did not find that to be the case. They are making efforts to broaden out the options that are available to W2 employees. But for me, it's not about creating an alternative set of facts, but it's really looking at the history of what exactly wirehouses provided. And ultimately, they provided distribution for products and services. And each of the firms that you identified in one way, shape or form, are financial supermarkets in their own right. And in each of those financial supermarkets, there are product owners that are responsible for each of the different products that they're trying to give to clients, to the end users.

**Gerry Goldberg:**

Whereas if you take a step back and you contrast that to the independent universe of registered investment advisors, the product, if you will, is the advisor who's looking out for the exclusive best interests of the clients. So it's a little bit different. And again, I don't want to take away from this that there aren't capable and talented people within wirehouses that are doing their level best and are doing good for clients. Of course there are. But that is not the norm. And unfortunately, for those of you who are still affiliated at wirehouses and you are doing well by your clients, more often than not, you're not going to get credit for it because there are plenty of other people in your midst that are not comporting themselves to the same standard of conduct.

**Mindy Diamond:**

So I want to be clear. When you talk about a financial supermarket, the days of wirehouses forcing advisors to sell proprietary products is in the rear view mirror. I don't think that's what you're talking about. But I think what you're talking about, and correct me if I'm wrong, is essentially the separation of church and state, the separation of product manufacturing and advice and safe asset custody. Correct?

**Gerry Goldberg:**

That is correct.

**Mindy Diamond:**

One of our biggest breakaway shows of the year explored that very topic of access and control. UBS Breakaway Rob Sechan describes having built an amazing business with nearly \$5B in assets under advisement with partner Jeff Kobernick. And one would think that a team that size



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certainly has an “all-access pass” to anything UBS might have available for them to serve their ultra-high net worth clients.

But as Rob shares, client service became increasingly difficult as UBS transitioned from what he describes as “an enabler to a risk mitigator.”

When it no longer felt like they could offer unlimited and unconflicted advice to their clients, it was time to explore ways in which they could. Yet in their exploration, they couldn't find an option that aligned with their vision of a better way to serve their clients.

So they built what they felt would bridge the gap in offerings and in December of 2020, the height of the pandemic, RIA firm NewEdge Wealth was launched.

I asked Rob what he felt was missing from the big brokerage firms.

Mindy Diamond: You had said to me, offline, that you believe that the wealth management space reached an inflection point where Wall Street firms could no longer keep pace with what ultra high net worth clients wanted. I would love to know what you meant by that.

**Rob Sechan:**

I guess it's as simple as we just don't believe in one-stop shopping. And the rationale is that no one firm has a monopoly on great products, services, or ideas. Our clients come to us to help them with everything that affects their financial future, and to help them you need to do what we said before, which is expand the menu, better price, raven technology that simplifies their lives. The big firms seem to manage the lowest common denominator, and it does not always foster an environment of client first. And because when you have a very large advisor population, you do have to, in some ways, protect the firm, right? And at NewEdge, you can be sure that we are sitting on the same side of the table as the client and making sure that we go to the best resource to help them with whatever particular goal they have or whatever particular problem they're trying to solve.

**Mindy Diamond:**

So specifically, what are the kinds of things that a \$10 million plus, 20 million, \$50 million client wanted but couldn't get access to as a client of UBS?

**Rob Sechan:**

I think they wanted open architecture beyond what you see in just a heavily curated list of investments. They wanted to make sure they were hearing idea flow from all the major firms and you can't be a client of UBS and actually hear what Goldman Sachs' Wealth Management Business is saying. That doesn't exist. And they wanted to make sure that when they were taking out a loan, that they really looked at everything that was available in the marketplace.



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There's countless examples of when you cast a broader net on how that creates benefits for our clients. We've had a lot of opportunity in direct investing as well, and I think at the big firms, they've been very slow to adopt an environment where clients can invest in really interesting family-oriented deals and really interesting private investments, maybe some pre-IPO investments. And so we've been able to give clients access to a lot of that.

And some of it expands beyond just investment access or access to credit, it extends the technology that's in the marketplace. When you look at what's happened and the evolution that's happened over the last 10 years in disruptive technologies, I think what we are able to do is try to harness all that for the benefit of our clients. And when you're smaller, you're able to move and take advantage of what's available in the marketplace. And sometimes the big firms as good as they are, as much as they invest, are slower to adopt. And so what we've done is taken a lot of that technology that in many cases is trying to disrupt the advisor and trying to create a connective tissue that allows the advisor to have a better relationship with their clients. So it's a blank sheet of white paper where you're able to go out and solve what's best for a particular client or for a particular advisor for that matter.

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

While the desire to do more for clients is nothing new, an expanded landscape has made that goal far more accessible to any and all advisors.

For Andy Schwartz, the Principal of the now \$8B+ Bleakley Financial Group, the decision to leave Northwestern Mutual in 2014 and go fully independent was about breaking past the “ceiling” that he and his team felt they were hitting—and represent their clients, not the firm they worked for.

Louis asked him about his motivations and here's what he had to say:

#### **Louis Diamond:**

So if you can elaborate a little bit on what were some of the reasons or motivations then that led you to leave Northwestern? Because we talk about there needing to be pushes and pulls. So you talked about some of the opportunities and being able to bring on someone like Pete and bring the business more up market and compete for larger type opportunities. But how come you weren't able to do that within Northwestern?

#### **Andy Schwartz:**

Well, I think you're in an institution and again, any institution, they have to sort of run that institution. And I don't want to say the lowest common denominator because they think that's



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kind of negative, but they have to run that institution at more of where the average person is. And if nothing else, it's just because of just capacity. You can't have a whole bunch of people doing a whole bunch of different things. One, because you want to protect your institution against people making mistakes and also you just can't oversee it all. So I think what ends up happening is once you become an outlier, it becomes a difficult place to be. We just became an outlier. So we were asking to be able to do things that people in my marketplace could do, but it wasn't something that they had the resources or had the interest in doing. And so that was just part of the problem.

And I think that a lot of people kind of run up that sort of ceiling. And I also liked just being out of conflict. And again, I think that they do a great job and they represent their clients well, but I always felt that there were some conflicts like at any institution. And I just wanted to be out of conflicts. I just want to represent my clients. I don't want to represent institutions. I don't want to have any bias. I just want to represent my clients. If they need insurance, great. If they don't insurance, great. Whatever the assets are, we want to think that we bring them the best assets at the best price. And there shouldn't be any opinion from any other outside party influencing any of those decisions.

But again, we were able to build a great business there. And if we stayed there, we'd have a great business today. I just think that it's given us an opportunity to build a bigger business and from a recruiting standpoint, it's given us tremendous flexibility because we have advisors that aren't interested in the insurance business at all. So there are no requirements on the insurance side. Some of them just want to be advisory only. They don't even want to be broker dealer affiliated. That's perfectly fine. We have several custodians. Some of our people are in a hybrid model with us, some of them are advisory only. Again, we're agnostic, whatever is the best approach, the best setup platform for an advisor that wants to join the firm, whatever will make him or her more successful, we want to have that to be available to them and we don't care.

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

For another Northwestern breakaway, Brett Gilliland, the decision came down to building something "great." And as the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Visionary Wealth Advisors, he ultimately wanted to play "in a different sandbox."

So after 13 years with Northwestern, Brett and his partner Tim Hammett decided it was time to follow that dream and in March of 2014, RIA firm Visionary Wealth Advisors was born with \$300mm in assets.



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Today, Visionary manages over \$1.8B in assets, and has 30 advisors on the team.

Louis asked him about that decision to leave Northwestern...

**Louis Diamond:**

Let's go back to when you're still at Northwestern. Of course, you could have just stayed at the firm. You sound like you're a successful advisor in your own, right. Kept recruiting, kept leveraging the infrastructure, but instead you opted to transition to form your own RIA firm back in 2014. Can you elaborate on what some of your frustrations were and maybe what you felt you couldn't do for your clients there?

**Brett Gilliland:**

For me, as I was becoming more and more successful, I was becoming less satisfied with my career and really what did it for me is I was fortunate enough to make what they call forum inside of Northwestern Mutual, which I think it's, I don't know, the top 250 advisors let's call it. I remember not being real, real happy, even though I just had a phenomenal year with production. We had just led the company in recruiting for managing directors. So there was a lot of things going well, but for some reason I still wasn't satisfied and I didn't know what that was. And so I just kept looking internal for me and I wanted that entrepreneurial spirit. I wanted to go out and build something. I wanted to go out and build a brand. I wanted to build something that our clients were excited about and proud of and who they were working with.

I say all this in there is a ton of great people at Northwestern Mutual. I still have friends there to this day. They're doing great work for people. So it wasn't necessarily that. It was just more for me was I wanted to do something more. I wanted to, again, to build something. I think there, we were building a nice income, but we weren't building an asset and we weren't really building a firm because you're doing it for the mothership, if you will. And for me, it just became again, that I wanted to play in a different sandbox and whether it's going to have a podcast or do some things that we do now, we just couldn't do there in comprehensive financial planning where you're not biased on either a product or what avenue they need to go down as a client. We wanted to be unbiased and have this independent firm that we could just say, "This is how we're going to serve clients going forward."

**Mindy Diamond:**

One of the key trends we've talked about over the last few years is the rising voice of the next gen and how they are becoming the biggest drivers of change in the industry.





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As big firms continue to push retire-in-place programs for senior advisors, the next gens are questioning their own future—and whether these programs will serve both their interests, and that of their clients, best.

We talked to both successors as well as senior advisors this year, providing an interesting perspective from both sides of the table.

And they also provided a great perspective on why the diaspora toward independence is increasingly being led by younger advisors.

Dan Johnson, now President and CEO of Birchcreek Wealth Management, was part of a multi-generational team at Merrill.

And while many teams are formed by the intentional “coming together” of like-minded players, others are created by the encouragement of the firm to join forces. A retention strategy of sorts—because being part of a team makes it more difficult to leave the firm.

In this case, while the team decided it was time to explore, the result is that they each went their separate ways, with Dan choosing independence, three of his partners opting to go to Morgan Stanley and one signing on to Merrill’s sunset program, CTP.

So in August of 2019, Dan launched RIA Birchcreek Wealth Management based in Dayton, Ohio.

I asked him why – as a young advisor with so many options – he chose independence:

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

So one of the trends we've written about a lot and spoken about and seeing is that younger advisors are coming to independence much sooner than they might have.

That one school of thought is you've got such a long runway. Monetize now, jump from one traditional firm to another, take some significant chips off the table. And then nine or 10 years from now, you're still young enough to go independent. That really is what we saw for a very long time.

But lately for advisors that are confident in their growth and really all about the fiduciary model of being able to really definitively say, I'm doing what's in the best interest of clients, they are going independent sooner and looking at this compounding effect of being a business owner over time. And what it means is as you say to forego what would have been six-figure deferred comp and seven-figure transition bonus. So talk to me about that. That has to come with some anxiety. Some, was there any crisis of faith about the growth and did I make a bad decision and some sense of boy what that seven figure transition package could mean for me.



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#### **Dan Johnson:**

If you had asked me that two years ago, sure. There was some moments of, am I doing the right thing? Am I a moron by passing up this potentially once in a lifetime opportunity? But since the transition, Mindy, not for a moment, not for a second.

First off, the growth that we've experienced in our close to first two years of business, plus what I see as the potential going forward will eclipse that moment in time, point in time windfall. But this kind of ties into the advice that we give clients. There is an element of, hey, if you reduce your expenses and broaden the gap between what you're bringing into your household, that increased savings rate, you can hit that work optional lifestyle sooner, that compounding effect that you make sacrifices today for what is going to help you achieve your potential goal.

And the other element I would actually add on to that, Mindy, is risk management. In the structure in the wirehouse, I always felt that if one guy or girl above me, didn't like the way that I approached them or interacted with them or did business or interact with clients that was risking my career. And I think we're seeing examples of that.

Now as an independent, as a true owner of my book of business, I'd have to have 85 client families fire me for me to lose my job.

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

Next gen Bryan Garris began questioning the value their team was receiving from UBS—something he characterizes as a “misalignment” of the bank’s priorities with their own.

He wanted what other independent advisors had: The freedom and control to serve clients and not have to worry about selling products or obligations to the bank. He wanted true open architecture and the ability to market and build their brand.

Yet as the successor of a multi-generational team with two senior partners it meant getting them on board with the vision he saw for their business as an independent firm—but it turned out to be a far easier sell than he expected.

In May of 2020, the team, then managing \$330mm in assets, left UBS to form TriaGen Wealth Management in Calabasas, CA with transition support from TruClarity Management Solutions.

I asked him about the misalignment he mentioned—and what could be so powerful to consider moving and here’s what he had to say:

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

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You've used the term misalignment a lot, and I like it. We hear it a lot. Talk to me a little bit about the misalignment you're referring to with respect to your goals for your business and the goals of your broker-dealer.

**Bryan Garris:**

Yeah. I mean, I think it's, if I ran a firm with 6,000 advisors that was looking at the broker-dealer side and the advisory side and having to run that, it's just a conflict when trying to manage how to run that practice, versus our small team of the four of us being lean and mean and knowing exactly what we want to do and how we run it. And so, I'm sure, like every other wirehouse, there's always the, "Okay, we need you to do X," or, "We want you to look at this," or, "There's a new way of how you're getting compensated based on these types of products," or, "There's a new grid rate," or, "There's something now that we want you to focus on." Or even the, come knock on our door and say, "Hey, Bryan, I need you to go attend to something for a meeting with a money manager I know I'm never going to be using."

And so, as I started doing the due diligence, as I knew that I wanted to be able to have the control, have the agility and make the decisions for ourselves, it was just more and more clear that the wirehouse model didn't make sense for our team. And there was nothing wrong with UBS, I actually very much enjoyed our time at UBS, it was just knowing that we weren't able to make the decisions if we wanted to turn right. But UBS said we couldn't go that direction. We didn't want to have that as something that would stop us from doing what we wanted to do.

**Mindy Diamond:**

It might not be all that hard to imagine a next gen successor with plenty of time to play the long game and the desire to leave the security of the big firm they grew up in. But what's it like for the senior advisor? They can certainly opt for the sure thing, their firm's retire-in-place program and monetize their life's work in place.

But what if you're not done? What if you don't want to retire? What if you had the chance to do it all over again?

That's exactly the way Ahmie Baum describes his transition to independence.

For the first time in decades, Ahmie started asking himself if his firm was indeed the right partner for the future of their business—a legacy that he and son Brian would build upon and Brian would someday take over.



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With \$420mm under management, Ahmie felt confident in their growth and gained a new sense of courage to do it all over again.

So, in June of 2020, Ahmie, Brian and their team launched RIA Interchange Capital Partners in Pittsburgh, PA with the help of Dynasty Financial Partners and Pershing Advisor Solutions.

I asked Ahmie why he chose to do this—and why now.

#### **Ahmie Baum:**

So yeah, there were all these things that lined up, but I have to go back to the growth strategy to say, "Oh, we can do this and now let's grow it," because the question is, do I want to leave... Well, first of all, the opportunity is huge out there. There's trillions of dollars available for us, for those that get it right. It's huge. So now the question becomes, do I want to give 50% or 40% or whatever, let's just call it 50%. Do I want to give that to UBS or Merrill or Morgan or whoever to make the decision about what to do and then I not have any ownership of that other than I own the stock? I can't, so.

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

The notion for you, the clarity around, "Now I'm confident about my growth and I know what it is I want to do," is everything, I get that completely. But you could have taken that same growth strategy and done a million other things. You could have gone to another wirehouse and would have been paid a lot of money to do it. You could have gone to a regional firm where you would have encountered... Kendra and Brian might've been a little happier, less bureaucracy, and get paid a lot of money to make the move. You could have gone to a quasi-independent or a boutique model, like a Rockefeller, and all of those models would have paid you significant transition money. And yet you chose to go independent, walking away from unvested deferred comp. How did you reconcile that?

#### **Ahmie Baum:**

Politics. I ask myself this question regularly, "what would you do Ahmie if you weren't afraid?" That was an important litmus test. So that was number one.

Number two, thanks to you and Deborah, you gave me the opportunity that I needed to learn about these. So first of all, the move to Morgan and to another wirehouse, because I know this industry, that was a lateral move and I understand why advisors who are 65 years old do it. I remember the first time when a friend of mine says, "Look Ahmie, I just took care of my life. I monetized it. I don't really care if I get anything grown or not. I got all the money now and



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whether I hit the back ends or not, doesn't matter, I'm clipping coupons for the rest of my life and my family, I'm good."

That was not what I wanted to do. I've got a lot of life left in me, I hope. And I've got a lot of passion for this business, as you know. So for me, that just was not the table. There's nothing in my mind... I think there are differences between UBS and Morgan and Merrill and those kinds of things, but for the end years of experience, which is me as the FA, I don't see much difference with it. So that wasn't even an option.

**Mindy Diamond:**

Ahmie shared what I think is the key ingredient to achieving greatness—and that's passion. But it was Rob Sechan's commentary that I think serves as a collective thought representing the breakaways we spoke with this year:

Yes, we left a ton behind, but from our perspective, we've always been long-term thinkers. And if we had a blank sheet of paper and said, 'what would we do?' We would have done this. We valued it highly because we looked at going independence as the NPV, Net Present Value, of doing the right things. So it was less about what we were walking away from and more about where we were going.

**Mindy Diamond:**

Yet when I think of the most profound advice shared during this season, it was this from Gerry Goldberg:

**Gerry Goldberg:**

I would say that you don't let fear preclude you from really giving serious consideration to the options that are available to you. Go into it with an open mindset and do your due diligence. It's very easy for those of us who were successful within wirehouses and elsewhere to say, "You know what, I'm making a good living. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Why should I let the powers of inertia continue to carry me forward?"

And if we had done that, we would have missed out on the opportunity of a lifetime. And depending, again, everybody's a little bit different. I'm not going to fall to anybody if they let the powers of inertia carry them forward. But if you're like us and if you want to be an impact



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player and you want to create something that's really special, why not take a look? Why not consider the options?

#### **Mindy Diamond:**

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Feel free to email or call me if you have specific questions. I can be reached by cell at 973-476-8578 or by email [mdiamond@diamond-consultants.com](mailto:mdiamond@diamond-consultants.com)

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