From Rookie To Veteran: Dr Hans Wijayasuriya Clocks 10 Years As Dialogue Chief

Dialog Telekom PLC, Sri Lanka's flagship telecommunications company, operates Dialog GSM, the country's largest mobile phone network, with a subscriber base of over 3.5 million. A subsidiary of the Telekom Malaysia Group, Dialog Telekom is also the largest listed company on the Colombo Stock Exchange in terms of market capitalisation of approx US$ 1.72 Bn, as of June 30, 2007.

The company operates 2.5G and 3G networks, supporting the very latest in multimedia and mobile internet services, with the distinction of being the first 3G operator in South Asia to commence commercial operations.

The company is also a key player in the internet service provision market with its state-of-the-art ISP, Dialog Internet, and also operates Dialog SAT, the country's

pioneer mobile satellite service provider.

The company's fully owned subsidiary, Dialog Broadband Networks, is the pioneer WiMAX service provider and a key player in Sri Lanka's ICT infrastructure sector, providing backbone and transmission infrastructure facilities and data communication services. DBN recently commenced the provision of fixed wireless telephony services, with the launch of Dialog CDMA. The Company also operates Dialog Satellite TV, through its subsidiary Dialog Television (Private) Limited, a direct to home satellite TV provider, which supports a broad array of over 50 channels.

In the following interview with Business Today Dr Hans Wijayasuriya, CEO, Dialog Telekom describes the journey from number four to number one, the team that achieved this and the secrets behind this amazing success story.

By Keith Bernard
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When Business Today interviewed you in October 1997 you had been just appointed CEO of the company and you said your main ambition was to make MTN, as the company was then known, number one in Sri Lanka. How would you describe your journey thus far towards that goal?
It would take me a very long time to describe that journey but I think at that time when I was asked that question I answered it on behalf of the entire Dialog team. We had a burning desire and commitment to become number one in the cellular industry. We started as number four and we were way behind the competition in terms of product and market position but we had the determination to improve ourselves and to benchmark ourselves against regional and international best practices and ultimately reach a position of leadership across a wide range of corporate attributes. Our plans were designed to achieve a number one position not just in terms of market share, but also in terms of profitability, product quality and innovation, customer service, brand equity and corporate positioning encompassing the prowess of our human resources, our position as a preferred employer and process excellence in terms of quality systems, information systems and resilience to competitive and other macro environmental challenges.

At that time, given our humble starting point we had to have a simple formula

because if not we wouldn't get anywhere. Converting that very complex task of becoming number one into very simple challenges was the first task. We took it step by step in terms of our market position, profitability, cost and revenue targets, brand building, distribution channel development and of course network infrastructure. We also set ourselves targets that corresponded to our vision of being a corporate leader in terms of human resources, training and development, quality systems and corporate governance.

An example of this balanced approach is the fact that we set out to get ISO certification way back in 1998. We had less than 75,000 customers at the time. Many questioned us as to the logic of going for ISO at this early stage of business evolution.

Likewise you might recall we were one of the few service providers in Sri Lanka to perform a fully fledged year 2000 (millennium bug) test run. We carried out a complete millennium simulation of our networks and billing systems in October by setting the dates to the Year 2000. In retrospect it may not seem such a significant event or initiative but it signifies that within this small company there was a very strong commitment to best practices which was instilled across the board in everything we did.

I Am Confident That As Long As We Are Close To The Humans Driving Our Business And In Parallel Maintain Our Mastery Of The Technology – We Will Be Able To Match Solutions With Needs While Delivering The Very Specific Outcome I Mentioned.
Those were the foundations. I think we got to number one in the year 2000 which was three years after the 1997 date you mentioned. That was very rewarding for the Dialog Team.

Then came new challenges. Having achieved number one status in cellular, where do we take it from there? The first thing we did was to re-coin our vision in 2001 and change it from being 'number one in the cellular industry in Sri Lanka' to being the 'undisputed leader in mobile communications and its convergence with the internet.' It was just around then that the concept of convergence was emerging in the developed world.

Our vision of leading a convergence of mobile technology with the internet, led us to become the first GPRS and MMS operator in South Asia. This phase of our life

saw the birth of our ISP, and also a range of other mobile and fixed internet product offerings. More importantly our vision of convergence drove our company towards an IP orientation. The internal transformation was smooth and I believe that addressing convergence early in the technology life cycle and riding the wave of change through incremental learning helped us avoid the step change related pains traditionally suffered by Telcos converting from TDM (Time Division Multiplex) systems to internet protocol based networks. I believe we did achieve our vision by the year 2004. We had a converged mobile communication product enriched with internet capability and furthermore had instilled IP strengths within the company.

In 2003 we ventured into the international gateway services market and soon achieved a sound number two position in the international gateway market. Today our share of this market exhibits robust growth and is estimated at around 35-40% which I believe is a good achievement in just four years of operation.

We revisited our vision once again in 2004 – this time in a more fundamental sense – involving an analysis of what business we wanted to be in. On the backdrop of a 60% market share in the mobile market supplemented by positions of strength in internet and international sectors, we needed to make some hard decisions for the longer term. We needed to decide on the path we were to take going forward – Only down a mobile route? Or do we commence a journey encompassing the broader sphere of total connectivity? This decision and its broader conceptualisation took a while to complete – in fact this is a decision that many global players have taken time to commit to.

For example take Vodafone, a world leader in mobile telephony – they followed a mobile only strategy until very recently. Today they have adopted a converged approach to connectivity. There are many examples of service providers deciding to go one way or the other.

I believe our board took a wise decision to establish the company as a fully converged quadruple play operator. A quadruple player is a somewhat technical term implying that you are in the businesses of telephony, broadband, media and mobility. While having envisioned a clear roadmap with respect to the technologies that would assist us in achieving this business configuration, we were intent on defining our business from the view point of our customer. After a lot of inward thinking and examination of what we were really aiming to provide

to our customer we coined our (current) vision, which is to be an 'undisputed leader in the provision of multi sensory connectivity resulting always in the empowerment and enrichment of Sri Lankan lives and enterprises.' It's a bit long for a vision statement – but I believe that in a complex business it is important to spell out the human angle to the business, which would in turn define the ultimate outcome to the customers of the business. Our business was thereby defined as one delivering multi sensory connectivity meaning that we would touch and facilitate connectivity to and between the multiple sensors of the human being: hearing, speech, sight, sensation, emotion, intellect, knowledge etc.

Our vision does not stop at achieving leadership which I believe was a weakness in the more target oriented vision definitions which we had set ourselves in the past. The latter part of the vision statement deals with the outcome of our leadership – thereby tethering the organisation to its outcome. The desired outcome of our leadership position is that it would result always in the empowerment and enrichment of Sri Lankan lives and enterprises, meaning individual consumers and businesses of all sizes. From 2005 onwards we started moving very concertedly along these lines and you would see that we have transformed ourselves into a total connectivity provider and a corporate leader.

We also recognise that connectivity goes beyond the technology dimensions of multi-media communications – we also action our vision through our corporate responsibility programmes which include cutting edge applied research in to distance education. The same philosophy extends to our community based activities – for example a decision to sponsor football or volleyball or sports for the differently-able is underpinned by the fact that these activities connect people, bridge divides and bring communities together.

The actioning of our vision necessitated an acquisition route. We were short of many licences and spectrum assets because we were at the time only a mobile, internet and international services operator. We made two strategic acquisitions in broadband as well as in Media. By the end of 2006 we had a full portfolio of technologies, licenses and spectrum assets including 3G. As we entered 2007 we knew that we were entering a year of aggressive capacity building in terms of human capability, networks and customer service. This year has been challenging. We have established a 3G network, fixed line network, wi-max broadband network, and satellite TV network. Next year onwards we will be commercialising the services offered by these networks in an aggressive manner –

with this will come the challenges of managing and delivering multiple products and services using a range of technology platforms.

That brings us to the present – 10 years on from my first interview with BT.

Have we achieved the level of critical mass that is needed to be at the optimal level of success in Sri Lanka in terms of connectivity?
No. I don't think so. That is a short answer – the longer answer involves looking at the outcome of connectivity in its broadest sense – take two containers which have different levels of liquid in them – if we "connect" these two containers, the liquid will settle to a common level in the two containers. The parallel I would like to draw is that if everybody is truly connected, then the outcome would be that everybody is equal in terms of access to knowledge, information and opportunity – for as long as inequalities exist in our societies and communities, I would say we have more work to do in terms of enhancing connectivity. This challenge is not limited to communication providers like ourselves, all organisations in this country have to work in unison to ensure this degree of optimum human connectivity.

Your success is partly because of your ability to anticipate the next wave of change and proactively step into the new. The multi sensory connectivity that you talk of is broad and less specific. How would you explain the relevance of multi sensory connectivity and its effect towards growth in your business?
Our business is about consumers and that is the first business lesson I needed to learn upon taking up general management since I started life as an engineer. Interaction with diverse communities and people and their needs and wants is not something an engineer has the opportunity to experience early in life. It is very rewarding to work in a people oriented business – in such a business, the life blood of the organisation is its human stakeholders – customers, employees, shareholders. Your question was with respect to the fact that we are now guided by a relatively non-specific and broad vision statement. If the business takes a truly human centric form, then it is important to keep one's vision broad and not strategy or technology specific – at least the vision of the organisation should be broad enough to enable it to embrace change and transform change in to opportunity.

Openness to change is probably increasingly becoming a key ingredient of

survival and success. We live in an era of rapid change. Change is also so multifarious that you don't really know from where it originates. Change might come from Google, or from an earthquake, but what is certain and central is the human stakeholder. So we have kept our vision broad in terms of leaving it open to human stakeholders to dynamically define what connectivity really means to them, but very specific in terms of the vision outcome – empowering and enriching Sri Lankan lives and enterprises. I am confident that as long as we are close to the humans driving our business and in parallel maintain our mastery of the technology – we will be able to match solutions with needs while delivering the very specific outcome I mentioned. That's the little bit of fuzziness or uncertainty that we have to live with in the business without trying to understand what happens next, since trying to put a box around this future will only constrain the possibilities.

In the 1997 interview you said achieving the number one position is a huge task but it can be done with the right team. You just reiterated the importance of humans. How did you pick the right team, with emphasis on the term 'right'?

That was at the top of my mind because I knew that without the right team we wouldn't be able to achieve the dream of being number one. The success of Dialog lies with my team and not with me – although many would attribute a large part of corporate success to the CEO. However there is one part of this success that I would like to bring home for myself and that is that I had the capability to select the best team, the people with the best potential and the right attitude and vision of success.

"The Success Of Dialog Lies With My Team And Not With Me – Although Many Would Attribute A Large Part Of Corporate Success To The CEO."

I knew only too well that attitude and vision is probably more important than specific expertise, experience or skill – I myself was an example of an inappropriately qualified candidate for the job of CEO – at the age of 29 and an engineer with no business experience at that. My predecessor who nominated me for the job set the priorities at an early stage – he told me that his selection and decision was based on (in his opinion) my having the right attitude and positivism for the job. So likewise I took it upon myself to select people who had the right attitude to make the impossible possible.

Today we have no hesitation in claiming them as the best Management team in

Sri Lanka. My team have been very modest with respect to their achievements – truly unsung heroes who are responsible for transforming Dialog into a corporate leader within the space of 10 years.

In picking and nurturing a team, one must have respect for diversity and the ability to see the best in everyone because any human being has more than 90% in strengths and less than 10% in weaknesses. If you can focus on that 90% and harness it within a carefully balanced team formation, where the summation of the 90% of all your people adds up to something great, then you've got the formula right. What you then find is that when people get reinforcing messages with respect to their strengths rather than reminders with respect to their weaknesses they marginalise and even overcome their weakness. They will either correct their weaknesses or learn not to bring them to bear on their lives or on others. The Dialog team represents an inimitable mosaic of unique strengths and capabilities – but there is a strong commonality in purpose and positive attitude. You would note that the team is also rich in diversity – in terms of professional background, sphere of expertise, age and gender. The paradigm that is inculcated within the team is to look at the positive side of human beings – everybody is strong at something. Find that something early and give the person the opportunity to take the strength to excellence.

My Team Have Been Very Modest With Respect To Their Achievements – Truly Unsung Heroes Who Are Responsible For Transforming Dialog Into A Corporate Leader Within The Space Of 10 Years.

What is the attitude you look for in the team you want?

One is the willingness to do their best, to do their utmost for something they believe in and to be honest in what they do. Also caring and respect for others. I think those few simple paradigms are what I look for.

You were 29 years of age at the time of the interview were Business Today boldly referred to you as the first Sri Lankan CEO of a multi million dollar venture, which of course antagonised a few other young CEOs who were not shy to express their objection to the statement. You outperformed many Sri Lankan CEOs by making Dialog not only the top performer in the telecommunications industry but also reaching the status of one of the top companies in Sri Lanka, if not the best. How challenging did you find it to steer to that position at the young age of 29 in the top slot of the

company?

Being a non-entity in the business world I had the luxury of nobody knowing my age until you published the article! BT certainly resulted in my age being brought in to focus – but it has never affected me or the performance of the company. The company was small at the time, and I had the good fortune that the Board and shareholders tolerated a lot of learning on my part for which I am very grateful. Something I'm very open about saying is that even today, ten years on, I have a lot to learn. Nobody knows everything. You have to be open to learning, and acknowledging how little you know, what ever age you are, is probably the best insurance against making expensive mistakes.

In particular I have learnt a lot from my management team and my subordinates. When I started off as CEO many in my team were more experienced than me. I learnt from them and continue to learn from them as well as from many other sources. Our team was at the time and even today relatively young – the average age of the Management team is well below 40 even today. Looking back I can't think of any instance in which age prevented us from getting at an opportunity. To the contrary, age helped us because we didn't have preconceived notions and hang ups and fixed ideas of how to do things. We certainly learnt a lot along the way and today are probably one of the most experienced telecommunications management teams in the region.

What about making yourself heard and acceptable as a young CEO in the business community?

By nature I'm a fairly private person, and have not aspired to being seen, heard or acceptable – I may be seen as not being very "social" in this sense but I trust those who know me understand that it is just personal nature and not about my being antisocial.

What would you attribute your success to? Being able to be in the right place at the right time, or the gift of a clear vision and the ability to relentlessly pursue that vision?

I think there has been a large degree of good fortune. It is foolhardy to attribute everything that went right to strategy and outcome. On many occasions I am sure it was divine guidance. It's not a business parameter in today's parlance – but many were the occasions when we as a team and individually were guided almost supernaturally. As a team we draw strength from multiple faiths and beliefs – but I am sure we have all lived by certain basic principles of morality which

underpinned our approach to business – we cared for our people, our customers and the community, and human beings in general and have not and will not knowingly, steamroll or hurt anyone along our path to success. This I believe is the inner strength of our story and likewise makes us deserving of the divine or supernatural guidance and protection we received along the way.

Some attribute the success of the company to the strength of Telekom Malaysia. Others in the industry too derive financial and technical advantages from their parents. How would you respond?

Telekom Malaysia (TM) is a crucial factor in the Dialog story. TM's unwavering support for the company and its management was the single most important determinant of the company's survival through the first few uncertain years of its existence. It was not just about investment – it was about resilience, commitment to the Sri Lankan consumer and agnosticism with respect to uncertainties in the environment. TM displayed unique maturity as a foreign investor in the country. For example TM was one of the first multinationals to appoint a Sri Lankan management team, in spite of holding 100% ownership of the company.

As a shareholder, TM then had the foresight to invest consistently and relentlessly in the company and also have forbearance with respect to the relatively inexperienced team, based on the faith that they would deliver in the end.

TM provided financial backing to the company in a period during which many other multinationals pulled out of Sri Lanka or decelerated their activities in the country. This "investment character" of TM is evident even today and has earned them the accolade of being Sri Lanka's largest foreign investor.

Having a strong background and training in the engineering discipline how did you adapt to a business and customer mindset?

I guess that was one of the personal transformation challenges I faced and one of the first pieces of learning I had to achieve. I was doing an MBA by distance learning at the time – this certainly helped accelerate the learning curve – but it was quite tough running the company and doing distance learning at the same time but nevertheless it was a piece of education that I needed fast. I think I quickly realised that being successful in one's customer relationship was about the ability to understand and empathise with others. That wasn't too difficult because at the end of the day the customer is always right but more importantly the customer is human. Addressing the human issue first is something we believe

in. If you look at our current customer relationship campaign – Sathkaraya, it emphasises the parallel between human situations such as a girl helping her father with a Sudoku puzzle and customer relationships. That campaign was designed by and for our team – all those features are our own staff – human beings in human situations.

"I Quickly Realised That Being Successful In One's Customer Relationship Was About The Ability To Understand And Empathise With Others. "

In addition to aspiring to achieve excellence in customer relationship management we faced many challenges with respect to business itself – I think there my engineering background helped me because in engineering you tend to rationalise and breakdown issues into building blocks – engineering is about defining the problem in understandable and communicable terms and identifying variables, dependencies and relationships between these variables and the desired or possible outcomes. So that is something about business modelling on a day to day basis which was fairly akin to engineering thinking – but I needed to concentrate a lot on developing my skills in, and understanding of, the softer dimensions of business outcome delivery – translating business plans in to customer satisfaction and brand affinity for example.

Engineers generally are drawn to the technical detail and are less averse to risk. How easy was it for you to step back from the technical aspects of the business, which by its very nature is technologically sophisticated, and focus on the bigger picture and take some risks?

I knew I had to do it and broaden my thinking – so I was overly conscious about my limitations and therefore concentrated on improving myself along these dimensions. Secondly as I said the team was chosen well and were more than capable of compensating for my weaknesses.

I must admit that I still do get distracted by the amazing possibilities the technology offers – but I constrain myself to what I should be doing – guiding and managing my team since they are the real experts in their respective fields.

It is rare in Sri Lanka to see top companies headed by engineers although not so rare in other parts of the world. Why do you think this is?

It could be opportunity. Take for example my getting this opportunity. Why did I get it? And also why did I take it? Those are the questions. So maybe it is opportunity and in that sense shareholders, boards and employers need to

increasingly think of engineers as people qualified to lead businesses because we are in an age where technology is the single most important driver of business. There's no getting away from this. It's not a marketing driven age, it's a technology driven age.

"It Is Important That In Today's Techno-Driven Era, Business Leaders Understand And 'Live' Technology."
It is important that in today's techno-driven era, business leaders understand and 'live' technology – value chains are being transformed by the day. Misjudging value chain transformation can destroy the position of a market or cost leader overnight. Take journalism – close to your own heart – just one year ago it was the photo journalist or cameraman who had the power of visually connecting the viewing public to an incident – today it is the man on the street who uses a 3G phone to transmit video footage to the media which in turn beams it globally within seconds – the power node in this situation has switched from the photo journalist to the citizen – media vehicles which adapt to this transformation would have a greater chance of success and survival than those who do not. Many other value chains are being transformed each day and it is technology that is driving that change.

So that's my pitch that business leaders need to be able to pre-emptively manage the technology environment and the changes within it.

Being the CEO of a top technology company in Sri Lanka do you offer opportunities for your engineers to go out and interact with other businesses?
Yes. We do encourage cross exposure and also facilitate such transitions – acceptance is a personal choice. Engineers also need to realise that they have an obligation to society which is beyond just playing with machines. In this technology era it is about taking on the mantle of leadership and not running away from it.

Business Today also interviewed you in 1996 when you were General Manager, Engineering at MTN Networks. During that interview you said that Sri Lanka was one of the earliest countries in South East Asia to adopt the GSM technology, which was relatively new. Was that decision critical to your success in carving a competitive advantage that led to your current position?

Certainly. That was a decision that I wasn't involved in, one which was taken before I was recruited by the company in 1994. Our shareholders at the time, the Maharaja Organisation and Telekom Malaysia – displayed unique vision and foresight in taking that step. Both organisations I believe had a strong commitment to delivering the best technology to the Sri Lankan consumer.

Having reached the pinnacle of your career in Sri Lanka where do you go from here with so many productive years ahead of you?
That's a question that I have never asked myself all these years because there is always an opportunity to do things better. There are always things to improve upon and things to put right. Those form day-to-day challenges. It is however something I guess I need to give more thought to.

Without venturing into the specifics of Dialog Telekom's business but trying to extract a few CEO success tips for the benefit of aspiring CEOs, what would you cite as the key traits for becoming an effective and successful CEO?
Firstly your human touch needs to take first place in your agenda. Your priorities should be about keeping your team motivated, happy, challenged and aligned to your corporate values. I'm not saying I did this throughout my career but its something that I've learnt. If you have your human beings in the right mood and spirit, at the right place and at the right time, motivated and enthused and therefore contributing the whole of their strength to the betterment of the company then you've got the most important part of the formula well established.

"When You're A Leader There's An Onus On You To Control Your Emotions. You Don't Have The Luxury Of Letting Your Emotions Affect The Happiness And Well Being Of Others."
Secondly when you're a leader there's an onus on you to control your emotions. You don't have the luxury of letting your emotions affect the happiness and well being of others. When leaders say something or express any emotion, people take it much more seriously and from a more potentially emotional angle than if it came from their peers. As a leader, You are in a much more powerful position to hurt someone's feelings or hurt someone's life than if you were not in a leadership position. So you have to think twice or thrice before saying something or doing something and this is something I have tried to abide by at all times.

On the other hand you may say that this strategy could lead to tardiness in

making decisions or communicating. That could be a downside but I would say from my personal experience that it is better to take a late decision than to take a hasty decision.

Managing uncertainty is probably another important deliverable for a CEO. My experience tells me that being able to appreciate uncertainty as an opportunity is a critical success factor for a CEO. One must not seek established rules for the game. Simply seek to convert uncertainty in to certainty in the best possible way. The CEO should be the Certainty Enabling Officer (CEO) of the organisation and certainly not the cause of uncertainty in the first place!

Last but not least – as I said in response to a previous question – we are living in an era where technology is transforming the rules of business and defining the winners and the losers. The CEO of the next decade must understand technology and the opportunities it delivers.

You put at the top of your list the people aspect of business and you speak a lot about your team. And you said the success of the company rests on the team who takes it along the journey. Usually your best people are also the targets of all predatory activity out there, those who are trying to emulate you or outdo you. How do you retain your best people under such conditions?
We have retained our senior team and added to it as well. Our retention levels are very good and certainly we haven't lost anyone to competition. The senior team displays a well meshed talent configuration and is also strongly bonded to the corporate vision. As I said earlier, respect for diversity underpins our people paradigm. Respect for diversity means that on one hand we are rich in terms of human diversity which is a corporate asset – but more importantly respect for diversity enables the individual to be him or herself at work without being forced to align to a corporate culture or fixed mode of behaviour. Happy people make happy companies and in particular ensures that coming to work is as look forward to and enjoyable as going home! Feeling at home while at work is important. This has led to a strong bonding and we haven't been the victim of head hunters or poachers.

Job design at Dialog is very dynamic and flexible. Most often, management has been able to draw up their own jobs and enrich their work descriptions to match their personal attributes and aspirations. When I interview candidates for senior

posts, I ask them the question 'On your first day at work if I let you sketch out your job what would you come up with?' The answer often determines the potential fit between the individual and what the company has to offer. If we do not have a job to fit the inner aspirations of that individual I would think twice about constraining his or her fulfilment at work, even if he or she is the best candidate on paper. I would much rather go for the second best on paper, if I have a job on offer that fits the candidate's aspirations.

As a CEO and a leader how do you recognise opportunities and spot the right talent to exploit those opportunities?

I think there's an element of gut feeling involved. If you spend enough time focussing on the people and know and appreciate them as human beings and not as a list of attributes and performance grades, then it becomes very easy. Just think of your closest friends – you are probably in a strong position to select the ideal job for your closest friends – since you know them as human beings and you know what makes them do their best – so why not with your own team?

How do you influence the right culture and create a productive environment?

Productivity is something I've heard a lot about in Sri Lanka – often with cynical overtones. We are quick to call ourselves unproductive or lazy. I think it's one of the greatest misconceptions that we have helped to create and propagate. To the contrary I can certainly vouch for the fact that Sri Lankans can form an extremely productive workforce. In Dialog you have a sort of microcosm of Sri Lanka's working society – ranging from professionals from multiple spheres, through the first time employed to unskilled and semi-skilled labour. Likewise, diversity in terms of race, religion and city or province of origin. They together have made Sri Lanka's largest market capitalised company and one of the best telecommunications operators in the region. If we were an unproductive nation and a lazy society this would not have been possible.

Secondly we talk about corruption and that people are always looking for shortcuts and trying to do things along the path of least resistance. Something I've learned from the Dialog experience is that in the right culture and environment people are basically honest and hardworking and want to do their best. So it's up to the leaders to create an environment where this approach is possible and is also rewarded.

Having made Dialog Telekom a blue chip in the country the next real challenge is to hold and sustain that position. How would you endeavour to do that?

It's always more difficult to remain number one. I draw some comfort from the fact that we have held the leadership position in the cellular sector for over 7 years. Now we are moving into new businesses where we are not number one and that gives us a good back to basics, back to the drawing board kind of challenge. If you look at the portfolio of Dialog's product mix and business challenges one is cellular in which we are the undisputed leader, fixed line business which has a lot of potential, TV which we are the market leader now in a short space of time but nevertheless have a lot of building to do.

One way to keep our feet on the ground is the self-imposed entry into businesses where we are relatively new and the underdogs. We are the leaders in some sectors while being challengers in others but we intend to maintain and grow our leadership in terms of an overall picture of multi sensory connectivity and in terms of how we enrich and empower Sri Lankan people and businesses. I am very confident we will achieve this vision in its fullest context.

In very general terms to pick your thoughts on another aspect of business – your view on corporate governance? Do you think it is a process that should be installed after a company reaches a certain size or which is conformance to a requirement by regulatory authorities once listed, or is it something that all companies should practice irrespective of size and type of ownership?

I think I'd start by agreeing with your statement that corporate governance might be seen by the short-sighted as a set of rules in a very formalised structure such as a public listed environment. This is a narrow view – corporate governance is all about the simple basics of honesty, ethics and transparency and it's just that when companies are very big, you have to specify the manifestation of these various principles through a predetermined structure or code. Constructs such as audit committees, ethics committees and rules pertaining to independent directors and their responsibilities are prescribed due to the size and formal accountability requirements of public listed organisations. But if you look at the underlying spirit behind these rules and constructs they relate to the basics of transparency, fairness to all stakeholders, ethics and honesty. In this sense a small business may in fact have higher standards of corporate governance than a

public listed company which is able to demonstrate 100% conformance to the rules. The rules are there to remind us of some basics – we should aim to deliver on the fundamentals.

"Corporate Governance Is Important And I Think We Should Seek To Truly Understand The Intended Outcome Of Corporate Governance Rules Rather Than Being Focussed Purely On Satisfying Them On Paper."
Ethical decision making is a basic requirement of a management or board of a business of any size. It is not about making the right decision – it is about having an accountability based process when arriving at a decision. Even in the smallest of companies I think that level of governance is important. Corporate governance is important and I think we should seek to truly understand the intended outcome of corporate governance rules rather than being focussed purely on satisfying them on paper.

But do you see the majority of companies who are listed and mandated to follow the principles of corporate governance doing so sincerely?
I can't comment on that. Obviously when you view the behaviour of public companies across the world there's a wide diversity between the levels of conformity and practice. Conformity is not necessarily a guarantee of internalised practice.

At Dialog do you follow it sincerely or because it is a requirement?
We had the luxury of starting very small and we were able to grow due to the strong commitment to ethics and values and also concern for the community and our multiple stakeholders. In this light the corporate governance rules make a lot of sense to us and internalising their practice has not been a challenge.

Do you think the private sector has a responsibility towards nation building and if so in Sri Lanka how do you think it can happen?
Certainly the private sector has a responsibility to be part of nation building. One challenge we have in the private sector is that we have not collectively taken uncertainty head on. In a few sectors you can see that it has been done and those sectors are world class. Telco is one of them, apparels is another, these are just two examples I am sure there are many others – but the commonality would be a positive approach to handling uncertainty and making the best out of the available resources without constraining oneself through negativity.

If we focus on assessing the externalities and putting them aside and saying we will do what is necessary to reduce the uncertainty even in a small way, we will be building a more certain foundation for somebody else to develop upon.