Leading Idea Group to New Heights

In March 2024, Dilhani Weerarathna rejoined Idea Group as its CEO during a challenging period. Her leadership has been pivotal in placing the company on a sustainable growth trajectory. Her entrepreneurial spirit, unyielding determination, and deep commitment shaped her remarkable journey from accounts executive to CEO. Today, under her guidance, Idea Group is on the path to achieving long-term success and expansion. Speaking with Business Today, Dilhani Weerarathna said that Idea Group has demonstrated the power of positive thinking, innovation, and hands-on leadership. With her vision and unwavering commitment, Idea Group is well on its way to becoming a leading player in Sri Lanka’s construction industry, poised for even greater success in the future.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.
Photography Sujith Heenatigala and Dinesh Fernando.



Dilhani Weerarathna, CEO, Idea Group.

Can you tell us about your career journey, what led you to become the CEO of this manufacturing company, and what key experiences from your previous role have been most helpful in preparing you for this challenge?

I joined Idea Group in 2014 as an accounts executive, beginning a journey leading me back to the company as its CEO in March 2024. When I rejoined, the company's fortunes had taken a downturn, but within a span of just nine months, we began to see a gradual upward trajectory toward growth and sustainability.

My professional journey has been one of constant learning and growth. Initially, when I started at Idea Group, I was entrusted with responsibilities far beyond my account executive role, explicitly overseeing the company's transportation

operations. That was a pivotal learning opportunity for me, especially as Idea Group was still in its early stages, having begun operations in 2012. The company's flagship brand at the time was Sivilima. What made this period particularly invaluable was the confidence our Managing Director, Sampath Mayakaduwa, placed in me. His belief in my abilities gave me the freedom to perform and develop my entrepreneurial skills, a factor that I attribute significantly to my success at Idea Group. I became so absorbed in my role that it no longer felt like a typical nine-to-five job. It felt like "our" business, not just "my" job. This deep sense of commitment was one of the foundations that shaped my approach to leadership.

I needed to enhance my knowledge further, especially since I had only completed two levels of the Chartered Accountancy course when I joined. That prompted me to pursue higher education, and I enrolled in a Master's program while continuing to work. By 2017, Idea Group had grown significantly from just 50 employees to 500. However, after seven years of service, I left Idea in 2017. I started my audit firm at the end of 2019. Unfortunately, the construction industry, including Idea Group, was significantly affected by the Easter Sunday attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent economic crisis. These challenges led to a significant downturn in Idea Group's business.

In early 2024, the Managing Director returned from Australia and invited me back to the company for just two months to help turn things around. The request felt like a call to return home to a place I was familiar with. I agreed to take on the CEO role in March 2024, and it was clear that the challenge ahead was significant. However, I am proud to say that within nine months, we have made notable strides toward improving the company's performance and culture.

My vision for Idea Group is to transform it into a publicly listed company within the next five years. We currently employ nearly 450 people directly and are responsible for the livelihoods of around 10,000 external stakeholders, including the extensive network of 200 showrooms. This vast web of indirect employment emphasizes our responsibility to improve and grow constantly. One of my key initiatives has been to foster a family-oriented company culture where everyone works together to drive the organization forward. I am committed to ensuring that every employee feels a sense of ownership in our collective success, and our ultimate goal is to take the company public by 2028, offering employees a stake in the business.

What can you tell us about Idea Group’s key products?

Regarding our key products, Idea Group offers a diverse range of roofing, ceiling, flooring, and wall panel solutions, all manufactured in our Katana and Pannala factories. Our products are eco-friendly, as we no longer rely on timber for production, opting for PVC, which replicates the aesthetic qualities of wood without the environmental cost of tree cutting.

Additionally, we offer a ten-year warranty on our products. As demand surges in recent months, we’ve maximized our production capacity, and customers have increasingly trusted us for quality and cost-effective solutions. Our plans include expanding our product offerings to cater to a broader market, from high-end to middle-range options, ensuring everyone can access beautiful, modern home solutions within their financial means.

How do you see the role of innovation and technology in driving sustainability in manufacturing?

We view innovation and technology as integral to our mission. Our product solutions have been at the forefront of introducing cutting-edge technology to Sri Lanka. A prime example is the introduction of iRoof roofing solutions and iPanel ceiling and wall paneling solutions, a novel technology for the Sri Lankan market. Its superior durability and resistance to external elements make it more user-friendly and significantly more environmentally friendly than traditional alternatives.

Our commitment to sustainability extends beyond the products themselves and encompasses the entire manufacturing process. We have invested in reducing the environmental impact of our product life cycles by adopting environmentally conscious manufacturing practices. Sustainable manufacturing involves creating products that do not deplete natural resources or harm the environment, a principle we have successfully implemented at Idea Group.

We take pride in operating a zero-emissions factory, where we recycle any damaged products before re-manufacturing them into finished goods, ensuring zero

wastage. Additionally, we accept used products from our customers and recycle them in our plant, minimizing the irresponsible disposal of materials and contributing to a more sustainable lifecycle. In a further step towards sustainability, we have begun cultivating plants on our factory premises, fostering a spirit of competition among teams to create the best cultivation plots, with rewards for the top performers.

At the heart of our business is innovation. Our Managing Director, Mayakaduwa, is constantly seeking ways to enhance our product range, ensuring we offer customers a variety of viable solutions that are both cost-effective and environmentally responsible. The ethos embedded in the letter “I” in the name “Idea” symbolizes our relentless commitment to innovation.

We firmly believe that innovation is crucial for sustainability and maintaining our relevance in a rapidly changing manufacturing landscape. The manufacturing sector is continuously evolving in response to climate demands, and we actively stay in tune with these developments to offer the best alternatives to conventional products.



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Under your leadership style, how has the company grown/ improved in financial performance and operational efficiency?

One core principle I champion is the power of positive thinking. Since stepping into the CEO role in March, I have made it clear from the first staff meeting that “impossible” is not part of my vocabulary. Words like “no,”“can’t,” and “let’s see” have no place in my lexicon. It is this mindset, above all, that has charted a new course for the company’s recovery. At a recent awards ceremony, a speaker emphasized that just 20 percent of theoretical knowledge drives success, while they

attribute 80 to positive thinking. This concept resonates deeply with me, as it mirrors my life experience.

When I arrived in Colombo from Kalutara in 2005, I had only forty rupees, yet I was determined. I had nothing but the drive to achieve great things – like the goal of purchasing my own home in Colombo, which I've now achieved. I never see an obstacle as an insurmountable challenge. Even if I initially lack the necessary expertise, I'm unwavering in my resolve to gather the right resources and tackle the task. This mindset has been the foundation of my journey, propelling me to lead this company on a successful growth trajectory.

I'm not your typical office-bound CEO. I believe in leading from the front, which means regularly visiting our factories and engaging directly with our teams. I constantly remind them that no challenge is impossible. Encouraging a mindset of positivity and resilience has been vital in fostering a team culture that believes in its ability to solve problems and drive success. Today, every team member fully commits to taking on challenges headfirst, with unshakable confidence and determination. That shift in morale has been one of the most rewarding aspects of my leadership.

When I took over, we faced a significant challenge – we had only one color option for our product – Burma Teak. Despite the limitations, I made it clear to the sales team that we would maximize what we had. I motivated our sales teams to focus all their efforts on maximizing sales of that single color while we worked to expand our offerings. This strategy slowly began to pay off as we strengthened our cash flow. My determination and optimism inspired my teams and garnered the support of our banks, all of whom trusted in my vision for the company. Since then, we have operated without taking a single loan, as I've maintained a strong and disciplined approach to cash flow management.

Women have a natural knack for saving, and I apply this instinct to managing the company's daily cash flow. I have zero tolerance for waste. Every raw material that enters our factory is meticulously monitored and utilized to its full potential. This approach mirrors running a household kitchen, where nothing goes to waste. By instilling a culture of frugality and efficiency, we can improve our financial position and pave the way for sustained growth.

Leadership isn't just about delegating tasks—it's about comprehensively

understanding the entire operation. As an entrepreneur, I am involved in the day-to-day activities across all departments, from manufacturing to finance. How else can I ensure that each division is running efficiently and effectively if I don’t have firsthand knowledge of its operations? This level of involvement ensures that we stay on course and are well- positioned for future success. After all, authentic leadership comes from staying in control and leading by example.



What is your vision for the company over the next three to five years?

As we look ahead to the next three to five years, our goal is to continue optimizing our marketing strategy, utilizing tools like the 7Ps framework, and performing regular SWOT analyses to track our progress and adjust accordingly. Our competitors may also be planning for the future, so we continue to invest in innovation and professional expertise to ensure our growth remains strong. Our distinctive market approach of maintaining an extensive network of sales outlets and the strong brand identity we’ve built with products like iPanel and iRoof give us

a significant competitive edge.

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How do you view the company's position in a competitive landscape, and what steps are you taking to strengthen it?

As previously mentioned, the essence of our company lies in the innovation embedded within the very name 'Idea.' We are committed to continuously differentiating ourselves from our competitors by adopting a unique and strategic approach to the market. One of our key strengths is the extensive network we have cultivated, which sets us apart. We are the only company in Sri Lanka that has developed a vast network of sales outlets promoting our panels. Our Sivilima network, in particular, focuses solely on promoting our panels while we maintain a separate network to support our hardware segment.

The Sivilima concept has become deeply embedded in the public consciousness as a trusted roofing solution, complementing our floor and wall panels to offer a comprehensive housing solution. Our products have achieved such a level of recognition that they are now synonymous with terms like iPanel and iRoof. Customers frequently request our products by name, often bypassing the generic terms for floor, ceiling, or roofing materials. In many cases, even when customers consider competitors, they instinctively ask for iPanel or iRoof.

That shows how successfully we have ingrained our brand and products in the minds of our customers, and our future strategy is to continue building on this competitive advantage. We aim to differentiate our offerings further, strengthening our position in the market while ensuring the long-term sustainability of our brand. By fostering brand familiarity and loyalty, we are committed to solidifying our leadership and maintaining an edge over our competitors in the years to come.

Knowledge is evolving. How do you stay abreast with evolving knowledge for your team members?

At our company, we recognize the importance of continuous learning and development in staying ahead of the curve. We are deeply committed to ensuring that our leadership team remains at the forefront of evolving knowledge and expertise. To achieve this, we sponsor higher education programs, including master's degrees, directly relevant to their roles. This investment enhances their skills and is a key driver in positioning the company for future growth, mainly as we aim to expand into the stock market. For our vision to come to life, we need team members with the knowledge and skills to lead and implement the required changes.

Beyond professional development, we also believe in investing in the well-being of our employees and their families. As part of our commitment, we offer a financial boost when significant milestones occur in an employee's family life. For example, when a child is born, we contribute 10,000 rupees into a savings account for the child's future. Additionally, we sponsor any child who reaches the threshold to pursue Advanced Levels for three years, and those who enter university receive a monthly stipend throughout their undergraduate years.

We aim to alleviate the financial strain on our employees, particularly when funding their children's education. By easing this burden, we enable our team members to focus entirely on their work, knowing their families are supported. Furthermore, this initiative sends a powerful message to our employees' children. They witness firsthand the company's commitment to their family's welfare, which could potentially inspire them to consider joining the company in the future, creating a lasting bond between our workforce and their families.

Women in corporate leadership positions are not ordinary because they have to break the glass ceiling. But you have conquered it in a short period. What advice would you give women aspiring to corporate leadership?

There is no secret formula for women aspiring to leadership roles in the corporate world, but women are inherently born leaders. As mothers, women already play a leadership role in their homes, balancing multiple tasks and managing their

households gracefully and efficiently. I was fortunate to witness this firsthand in my mother. She woke up at 4 a.m. every day, and the energy of the kitchen, fueled by her determination, set the tone for our family's day. Her incredible work ethic made a lasting impression on me, shaping my view of leadership. It is this very ability to manage diverse responsibilities that makes women natural leaders.

However, many women need to recognize their leadership potential. I often tell women entrepreneurs that the kitchen is like a laboratory where creativity and innovation happen. It's a space where we mix and experiment with ingredients, just like a leader would experiment with ideas and strategies. Many women say they lack time to focus on their careers due to household responsibilities, but planning is the key to overcoming this. Women can nurture their leadership skills and drive entrepreneurial growth by dedicating even one hour to exploring their creativity and innovation.

I can speak with confidence because of my financial independence. This independence has allowed me to set an example for my family and be a source of strength. A financially independent woman is fearless – she can travel alone, make decisions with conviction, and live on her terms. I've experienced this personally, and I can attest to the power that financial freedom brings. A woman who controls her finances is empowered to invest in herself – be it her career or personal growth – and is also liberated from the limitations imposed by financial dependency.

How do you balance your personal life with your immense CEO responsibility?

Balancing my personal life with the demands of being CEO is undoubtedly challenging. I wake up early every morning, often getting only a few hours of sleep, and continue to pursue further education, currently working toward a PhD. This commitment to lifelong learning ensures that I remain prepared for the challenges ahead, especially as a company leader with so many people depending on my direction. The same expectation applies to my team members, as the knowledge and skills they acquire will be crucial to the company's long-term success.

What has been the most rewarding aspect of your journey with this company so far?

The most rewarding aspect of my journey with Idea Group has been the company's

transformation in such a short time. The trust and energy reinvigorated within the team have been remarkable. I’ve fostered a culture where our employees feel like part of a family, and this spirit of collaboration will propel us to even greater heights in the future.

