

# HOW WE BUILT EYEXGEN AND WHAT WE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

## *Reflections of CEO Frieda Michelia*

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*by Katharine McLennan*



The Imagination of what your  
organisation might be like in the future



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# Frieda Michelia CEO, Eyexgen



Frieda Micheia has been the CEO of Eyexgen since the end of 2019. In this article, she reflects back on the last five years of the company and what her people did to make it the success it is today.



# A CEO HAS DIFFERENT TASKS IN DIFFERENT CYCLES. SOME CEOS ARE FOUNDERS AND BUILDERS. OTHERS HAVE THE LUXURY OF MANAGING MOMENTUM THROUGH A STABLE ECONOMY OR A PERIOD WHEN BUSINESS MODELS ARE NOT BEING DISRUPTED. MY TASK WAS DIFFERENT – HOW TO DISRUPT AN INDUSTRY WHILST ITS OVERALL STAGE –i.e. the HEALTHCARE SECTOR--WAS METAMORPHOSING DAILY

For the last 1825 days, I have led a company of over 18,000 people. I led through pandemics, recessions, bubbles, a near-miss world war, a serious world environmental catastrophe, and a significant shift in the way healthcare is now delivered in societies around the world. What we once called “emerging” worlds can no longer be known as that term as many of these once-called countries have overtaken the GDP growth of the once so-called “developed” nations of our former OECD. New competitors to Eyexgen have emerged, business models changed and we ushered in an entirely new way to serve our customer over their lifetime. We didn’t just persevere by growing at a stable 10% growth rate as we originally set out to do in 2019; we transformed the bionic eye industry.

The changes that took place in the world from 2019 to 2024 were evident when I took over and we took advantage of them: the world of connected care and the digitalisation of health, the internet of things, the global mobility of our customers and the demand for channel simplicity, the healthcare payers’ determination to pay for value instead of for activity, the rapid dissemination of price information across borders meaning a rapid decline in the ability to attract high margins, the rapid advances of stem cell therapy, the entry of the likes of Google, Apple and even Tesla into the medical device arena particularly given their advantages in big data and user experience. The task of the CEO has never been as difficult as it is today. In that vein, my story is one of progress versus perfection. The outcomes of our decisions will play out over decades, but we never feared taking big

steps to create long-term value.

For the last five years Eyexgen has been undergoing major transformation, change that began under my predecessor Ronald Avery, but that escalated significantly over the last five years the work in five areas: our strategic focus, our product/service portfolio, our innovation strategy, our global footprint, and our organisational management. When I started at Eyexgen in 2019, we were a classic product-manufacturer with decentralised singular-country-driven markets that had one-year Profit and Loss operating plans. We were in danger of heading towards a Nokia-like commoditisation challenge if we responded as Nokia did and kept to our strategy of high margin constant refinement of ultra contact lenses and laser surgery. Margins were being challenged with health care budgets being asked to cover more and more diseases and people as well as competition getting more and more efficient. The concept of a bionic eye loomed largely, and we saw the first signs of the FDA wavering on its staunch determination that a bionic eye must clear five years of trials. Moreover, with the success of the likes of CostCo taking away the mass-produced contact lenses from the optometrists and eye retail stores, these retailers were forced to become generic eye product retailers, offering high precision glasses, laser surgery and contact lenses. We had to evolve quickly.

Today we are an integrated lifetime vision solutions business that severely vision impaired customer comes to throughout their life. We have

endured the last five years because of our willingness to reinvent the way we serve our customers, our genius in improving the technology of vision and our ability to respond as well as shape the way healthcare is provided to our customers. My aim in this article is to share what I’ve learned more broadly about how to lead an organisation through changes. There are several lessons.

First, you have to be disciplined and focused. You need a point of view. Your initiatives should be interconnected—and it’s the leader’s job to connect the dots for everyone in the organisation. All the major initiatives we implemented during the last five years at Eyexgen were aimed at driving bionic eyes as the standard of care for the severely and profoundly blind customer. As an organisation, we completely changed the measure of success from revenue growth year on year to market penetration in each of our countries – and not only “market penetration” but the impact of that market penetration on the economic and social wellbeing of that particular country. By helping a child see, we could measure the impact of that child’s contribution to society through their education outcomes. By keeping an adult in the workforce, we could measure the impact of that adult’s contribution to the country’s productivity and taxation base. These were the arguments that caused the governments that we worked with to take notice as the World Health Organisation did in 2021 when it collectively called for serious action to help address the plight of 290 million people living with vision impairment. Eyexgen simply became obsessed with reaching as

customers who were unable to see with any other aids and being able to provide them with a bionic eye through a lifetime of care that they could afford in both cost and ease of access physically and emotionally. We also became obsessed with proving the economic and social impact that doing this was having.

The second lesson concerns the journey a leader must embark on before undertaking a transformation. You have to go through a period of rewiring your brain—getting yourself to the point of profoundly believing that the world is changing and that the survival of your company depends on either anticipating the change or being in the vanguard of those reacting to it.

Third, you have to get people in your organisation to see the need for change as existential and you have to empower these people to take on the risk of this constant change.

Fourth, you need to be all in—you must make a bold, sustained commitment to the transformation.

Fifth, you must be resilient, which means you need to have a company of employees that are physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually fit – ready for the unexpected, rested for the long journey, able to use spare brain capacity to anticipate sudden change and use exceptional emotional radar and intuition to make connections to customers that none of our competitors have been able to sustain.

Sixth, during the transformation, you have to listen and act at the same time. You need to allow new thoughts to constantly come in, and you need to be open to the reality that your organisation will have to pivot when it learns something new, while still having the courage to push people forward.

Finally, you must embrace new kinds of talent, a new culture and new ways of doing things. We have hired hundreds of people of a very different DNA than the electrical and mechanical engineers, manufacturers, optometrists and sales people that we used to have. We still have those people, but we also have data scientists, user experience gurus, health economists, government lobbyists, neuroscientists and serious healthcare reformers that are part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century revolution of healthcare that is going on as this article is being written. We are building these capabilities globally. In 2000 when I started at Eyexgen, 80% of our staff was based in Minneapolis. Now over 70% of our staff is based around the world and only 30% of it is based in the United States.

Before delving into each lesson, I'll describe the five transformations we've undertaken.

## THE TRANSFORMATIONS

Over the last five years, we did five things that were transformative. First, we shifted how we were thinking strategically about the customer. Before I commenced as CEO, we had already commenced a strategic journey of five platforms: Focus on the Customer, Grow our Core Business of bionic eyes, laser surgery, and ultra contact lenses, Build a Services Business; Unify the Global Organisation to be much more integrated and far less decentralised, and Complement our Talent by acquiring businesses that could help us in advancing our technology or deepening our market penetration. We had aligned the organisation each year along business priorities in four of the five platforms, however, without ever going into a globally concerted effort to define how we were going to collectively “focus on the customer.” We left that up to each country to do within the scope of their one-year profit-and-loss budget. Starting in 2019, we began to define three global customer segments in which we would work as a global collective to determine how to drive awareness, meet the needs more effectively ensure reimbursement was more and more available, provide products and services that were more and more suitable to this particular market and drive channel behaviour that was also more and more suitable. In 2019, these four channels were broadly defined as “Paediatrics,” “Young adults,” “Working Adults,” and “Retired Adults.” Over 2019-2021, we worked across countries to develop short, medium and long-term marketing and sales strategies and capabilities that have led to Eyexgen becoming the all-product and service solutions company for the vision impaired in the 15 formerly OECD countries and the top 15 countries formerly known as emerging. Over the last five years as we have seen across the world, the word “emerging” no longer applies to many of these country's economies as their growth and GDP as well as sophistication has far surpassed that of the former “developed” OECD nations we no longer use this distinction ourselves. As the world's flows of technology, finance, trade and data continue to increase exponentially across borders, we are increasing having to question our use of countries, regions and any type of geographical organisation and are more and more starting to work globally as our customers are beginning to want to source the best product at the best price with the best range of services at the best reimbursement and healthcare provision is increasingly globalised.

Second, we radically changed the portfolio of our products and services transforming ourselves from a primarily ultra contact lenses production company with an upgrade services business to an integrated lifetime direct-to-customer business that is the first AND lifetime port-of-call for all severely vision impaired people around the world. Because of the clinical trials, lobbying efforts and sheer weight of evidence and cost effectiveness proof of concepts we were able to assemble, there is no more doubt, ignorance or fear as to whether one of our bionic eyes will be better than any laser surgery, contact lens or pair of glasses; it is simply the standard of care and a medical practitioner is considered negligent if they do not prescribe this standard. The research we led particularly around impaired vision and Alzheimer's was considered truly momentous in the aging world that we have found ourselves and this has opened the adult market in landslide proportions. We were responsible for establishing this standard of care and the reimbursement mechanisms for our customers from the primary healthcare providers. Our reimbursement mechanisms are now considered a global standard of care particularly as healthcare is becoming more and more globally consistent as we are seeing insurers becoming more and more global and reimbursement mechanisms

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becoming more and more cross-border from economies of scale. The economic arguments we have proven and continue to prove for the impact of seeing on the contribution a seeing child and adult can make on their economy – not only in the money we save, but particularly in the productivity a country gains in economic and social capital have been considered instrumental in moving governments to seeing investment in vision as a high “ROI” proposition.

Third, whilst we have always been renowned for our innovation in electrodes, ultra contact lenses and laser surgery, we have expanded our innovation processes into many more domains:

- Digital aps that build/promote brain plasticity in our customer as the learn/re-learn seeing (now being picked up in brain damage, epilepsy)
- Seamless integration of the customer experience amongst the surgeon-clinic-optometrist-reimbursement-bank-online-store so that it is all organised through a “one-stop-ап” (now being picked up in other areas such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, obesity). Here, we focused on digital health solutions that transformed how care was provided so that we maximised the customer experience, maximised their outcomes, and helped us scale more profitable clinics. We developed artificial intelligence solutions that automated and eliminated many of the non-value adding work that clinics had to do and minimised the time our customers had to spend worrying about their bionic eyes and their therapies, so that they could focus on what was really important
- Partnership with IBM Watson and our leverage of the acquisitions of LaserEye and EyeData that completely transformed the way we were able to use data to recognise, refer and then fit from contact lenses/glasses technology into bionic eye technology as we moved LaserEye from the US across the world’s optometrists channels.
- Lead of the world’s leading bionic eye technology across the medical device world with the release of the programmable chip Galaxy into the bionic eye market. Never before has the world had access to a totally eye-implantable chip that could be programmable at the complexity of the Galaxy and the safety and life of battery that it accompanies as well as the functions it direct. This means that at long last the world can

## FIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

Frieda Michelia introduced major, interconnected changes to Eyexgen’s strategic focus, portfolio, innovation strategy, global presence and organisational culture

### STRATEGIC FOCUS

From  
Product-R&D Ultra Contact Lenses  
Manufacturing Driven  
To  
Customer-Lifetime Focused Experience with all-of-company working to drive lifetime uptake of products and services in target segments

### PORTFOLIO

From  
Ultra contract lenses product production company with an upgrade services business, selling primarily business-to-optometrist/hospital/surgeon  
To  
An integrated lifetime direct-to-customer business that is the first AND lifetime port-of-call for all severely vision impaired around the world. There is no more doubt, ignorance or fear as to whether one of our bionic eyes will be better than a contact lens or even a guide dog; it is simply the standard of care and a medical practitioner is considered negligent if they do not prescribe this standard

### INNOVATION STRATEGY

From  
Being renowned for innovation in mechanical and electrical engineering in the ultra contact lenses hardware and software industry  
To  
Also being renowned for innovation in the bionic eyes and its associated digital apps for brain plasticity, informatics, seamless integration of customer experience across the channel, extraordinary leverage of data to recognise, diagnose, refer and fit, and the world’s leading fully programmable implantable chip technology

### GLOBAL PRESENCE

From  
A company classically structured with HQ functions, manufacturing, R&D (50% of staff) in Minneapolis and countries/regions aligned in 1-year P&L separate customer units  
To  
Expansive footprint shifts that have grown because of our hub-and-spoke optometrist service and remote programming as well as our agile organisation team deployment

### ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT

From  
The classically engineer/R&D/manufacturing throwing over to the sales & marketing separate country organisations  
To  
Agile Customer Target Teams (i) that are deployed in cross-functional, cross-geographical teams; (ii) that are given clear penetration targets/country economic ROI targets and time frames; (iii) that are encouraged to experiment, learn from other agile teams – and particularly from other companies other industries; and (iv) that watch as the health care sector tectonically shifts in this decade

start thinking about the “chipped” human being – no longer needing programmable devices that are worn outside of the body – we have the technology to augment the body from within

Fourth, we have increased our footprint extensively both in terms of our manufacturing footprint with the addition of our plant in Korea and Poland, but we have also focused on a strategy of building presence in the world’s top 200 cities, as we have seen the extraordinary shift of urbanisation occur and the urban consumer class increasing. We have made significant inroads into China and India, for example, with 46 of our top 200 cities alone existing in China alone. The methods we have devised of hub-and-spoke optometrists and remote programming have been integral in our rapid growth in these cities. Delivery of cost-effective lifetime solutions that governments can afford has been absolutely essential.

Fifth, we have had to adapt our culture to embrace the very disruptive world we have found ourselves over the last five years: the urbanisation, the technological change, the aging world, and the global flows of trade, finance, people and data. My predecessor had commenced a “One Eyexgen” approach that began the process of decentralising many of our back-of-office support functions: IT, logistics, quality, regulatory, warranty. We knew, however, we needed a much more integrated matrix approach that was not about centralisation or decentralisation. The matrix we needed to build was an agile one whose end point was the constantly shifting life stage point of our customer – who would be changing age, geography, and quite possibly level of vision impairment, even language of choice, channel of choice, and the way they want to access assistance over their lifetime. This matrix might start in Bangalore, travel through Dubai, then go through Denver, then Chengdu in China, and finally Minneapolis. It could be a complex chain of Eyexgen employees, optometrists and surgeon partners, technology partners, apps providers, services providers and reimbursement specialists all seamlessly connected unbeknownst to the Eyexgen customer. We could no longer create an organisation that was rigidly defined by immovable regions and countries and headquarters “us and them” functions that were not able to flex to meet the customer’s needs. Alongside the fundamentals of our V.I.S.I.O.N.-defined culture (see last page) and our critical See the Way leadership training (see last page), we created an organisational approach of global, multi-functional agile teams constantly deployed against different customer segments aimed at getting better and better at helping people

see, empowering people to connect with others and live a full life. These teams are given a certain population of customer as a target and a time frame and their goal is to work across sales, marketing, services, reimbursement, regulation, quality, manufacturing, research and development, IT, people & culture, clinical research to assemble the best solution for that customer segment. As they learn through experimentation, they capture their lessons in a methodology we have come to know at Eyexgen as Ideas from Everywhere which has become synonymous with a beloved form and earned learning privilege at Eyexgen. This privilege is bestowed upon any employee who can demonstrate by application that they have an agile-idea that will drive customer penetration in a particular segment requiring a multi functional team approach with a pay off over a defined geography and time frame that is a business case we can invest in. In this way, our "Ideas from Everywhere" methodology has created an internal innovation machine in the way we constantly are thinking through sales and marketing methodologies, product and services ideas, reimbursement mechanisms and the very nature of healthcare provision itself.

Now I'll turn to what I've learned about leading the transformation over the last five years.

## BE DISCIPLINED

As a naturally curious and driven organisation, Eyexgen has always been overcommitted in its initiatives, and our people have felt overwhelmed by the number of projects and directions we were trying to take. Early on, establishing the five platform strategy helped us create a high level of business priorities that linked to each of our employee's goals, and this helped, but we needed to do more to prioritise the organisation. From 2019, we aligned the organisation around customer segment priorities, and instead of simply targeting "growth," for example at 10% -- we leveraged data to determine what achievable customer penetration markets were. What was truly our total addressable market of customers we could reach? Why weren't we reaching them? How could we address this as an entire industry across the supply chain and how could we as Eyexgen influence this competitively before any of our competitors? As an organisation, we became obsessed with ensuring everything we did had an outcome of driving a particular customer outcome that could be measured, and we refused to allow people to spend either dollars OR just as importantly time unless they could prove the impact they were going to have on getting more customers to see

more effectively with a lifetime of care that they could afford in both cost and ease of access physically and emotionally. We became exceptionally good at saying EITHER no, we're never going to do that; OR we're going to do that in 1,2, or 3 years' time but not this year. Measuring customer impact on everything and being accountable to show it became every employee's mantra, and we recognised it both financially and in all of our communications and recognition and talent strategies.

## IDEAS FROM EVERYWHERE

Good leaders are curious. They are absorbing constantly changing information about potentially important trends and developments all the time, and they can learn both from each other, from time in the field, from time in other functions – and particularly from time in the outside world and other periods. They don't instantly react to trends. They have methods of contemplation and reflection. They know how to read and reflect together about these trends and then collectively bring insights that are new and creative. Over the last five years, we have developed a "Ideas from Everywhere" agile method of organisational learning and structure that knows that our people must constantly expose themselves to each other, the customers, the markets and other industries in order to have the best strategic ideas. We started in 2019 when we did our first deep dive with 200 people against our first definition of three customer segments. We surrounded ourselves with data, whiteboards and locked ourselves up for three days with no PowerPoints but plenty of artists to draw up our ideas, hundreds of sticky notes, pens, ideas and years and years of experience. Since that time in 2019, our organisation has become more and more sophisticated in developing an annual and monthly cadence of this way of thinking so that is how we think and confer with each other, how we manage projects, how we actually structure the organisation around agile projects focused on particular customer segments that also have serious learning agendas in which we insist must include exposure to other industries, other technologies and multiple geographies.

As CEO, I have a personal learning agenda that sees me collaborating across government, university, technology and corporate sectors that has allowed Eyexgen to play far above its market size to influence the revolution that is happening in health care. In this education, my meetings with the CEOs of Tesla, Apple and Google; my congresses with key academics in healthcare



amongst the critical universities driving the reform; the formation of the Top 200 Capital City World Organisation have all been critical in the "Ideas from Everywhere" mentality we have applied.

## EMPOWERMENT AND RISK

At the heart of the last five years has been the concepts of empowerment and risk. Change is a given—we know that, but we needed to equip our leaders with the skills and the permission to take risk, particularly in sales and marketing approaches. We historically had a DNA based on very strict medical device-regulatory-quality safe in-eye-lenses view that meant a completely different risk approach to what we needed to take commercially. Over the last five years, we have worked to extend our cultural values of V.I.S.I.O.N. (Value the customer above all, Innovate every day, Solve problems across boundaries, Ideas from Everywhere, Own your own learning, and Never give up). We have equipped our leaders with the skills they have needed in the four domains of conceptualising strategy, delivering results, managing teams and leading self. We have encouraged our leaders to take risks when it comes to new approaches to how to reach customers with different marketing and sales techniques, and as a result, Eyexgen has played an integral role in the reform of the global healthcare agenda in the last five years. We have also been able to attract some of the best talent in capabilities that would more typically be bug that our young talent genuinely seeks. attracted to companies such as Amazon, Google, and PayPal but who are looking now to the human evolution challenges and have really caught the medical device-meets-data-meets-health-care-meets-politics transformation opportunity

## BE ALL IN

We decided back in 2019 in the Customer Deep Dive workshop that we needed to continue to get more and more of our people thinking and being involved in trying to solve the industry challenge of how to solve vision impairment. Our collective brainpower was always going to be better than a few executives' ideas at the top, so we have worked over the last five years to "be all in." Not only does that mean committed to our goals that we have set against each of our customer segments but "all in" as a company, removing boundaries every day. This is particularly removing boundaries between geography and between functions, as these boundaries have completely needed to shift in our agile teams that we have deployed against customer targets. These teams are constantly changing populations that are cross-border, cross-language, cross-function. Their goals are clear – they know the customers they are going after. They have a lot of precedents to learn from both from Eyexgen examples and technology that have gone before them, but also from the external learning opportunities we have given them in other industries. The empowerment and risk approaches we then give them allows them the freedom to try new approaches that sometimes work and sometimes don't work, but always have a learning point to them. This is critical, because being "all in" means through thick and thin – and begin willing to learn through fast failures and pivoting fast.

## BE RESILIENT

Critical to the disruption we have seen in the world around us and all the changes we have seen in our industry and with our company is the ability to persevere when things get tough, when prices are falling, when reimbursement is slowing, when technology is confusing, when competition is stiffening. Transformation takes time, and we know that. If change is easy, it is not sustainable. You need a thick skin to see it through. In the capital markets, two ideas—unlocking value and creating value – get thrown around almost as if they were interchangeable, but they are not. Unlocking value frequently means strategic capitulation for short-term gain. Creating value is the result of long-term investing – for example, when we choose to invest in a LaserEye or an EyeData in order to slowly build a connected care overall global position that will transform our vision impairment position. It is really hard to appreciate these moves if we only use a short-term lens.

We have to be in this for the long term – and in order to be able to see the long term, we need our people emotionally, physically,



"WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN KNOWN AS A INNOVATIVE MANUFACTURER— NOW WE ARE KNOWN ALSO AS AN INNOVATIVE HEALTHCARE SOLUTIONS LIFETIME PARTNER – meaning innovative across marketing, sales, reimbursement, health economics, data science, user experience, internet of things, government lobbying, healthcare reform"

-Frieda Michelia  
CEO, Eyexgen

spiritually and mentally fit. It is no longer sufficient to provide an OH&S strategy for the health of our arms and legs. If we are not engaging the hearts and minds, if we are not ensuring that our workplaces are constantly providing our people with the best opportunity to expand their brain capacity and have those brains work at their optimum levels, if we are not ensuring that our people are finding meaning in what they are doing every day, we do not have resilience, and we do not have transformation.

## BE WILLING TO PIVOT

One of the hardest challenges in driving change is allowing new information to come in constantly and giving yourself the chance to adapt while still having the courage to act and push people forward. There's a tension: even as you're making a major commitment of resources, you've got to be open to pivoting on the basis of what you learn, because you're unlikely to get the strategy perfect out of the gate. Nothing we've done has ever turned out exactly as it began.

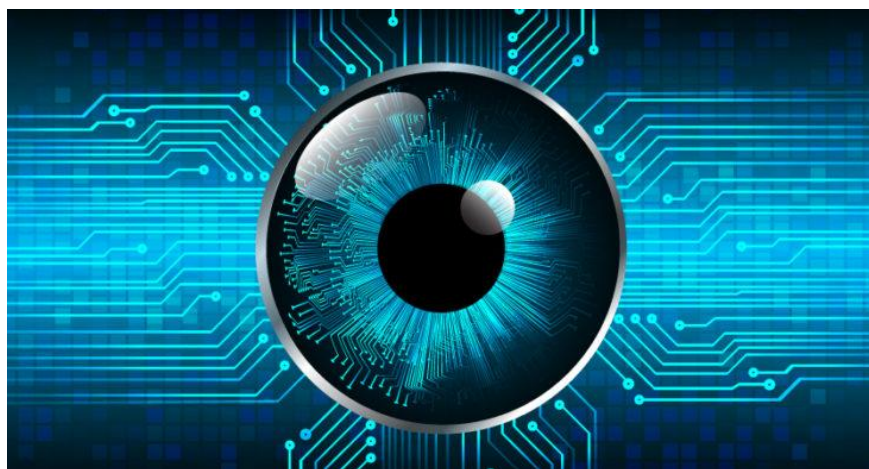
When we started the customer segment strategy, we knew the "Aged Adult" segment was huge, but we had not thought through the ramifications of the speed at which it would move when the clinical evidence of vision impairment and Alzheimer's came through as rapidly as it did. We simply were not prepared for how fast demand would start to appear and how poorly equipped our channel partners were at meeting the demands. We had somewhat predicted this back in 2019, but we had not taken seriously the investment of time and dollars we needed to spend in our optometrist and eye surgeon sector as well as the speed of deployment of our hub-and-spoke and remote optometry solutions. We were able to move quickly, though, when we realized that demand was going to outstrip our channel's ability to provide solutions in many of our countries. This was critical to the new model of healthcare, which we were able to innovate, a model that is now inspiring many of the other disease states to follow suit and reforming the way healthcare is delivered across the world. We were able to work with our channels to deploy remote services capability quickly, which satisfied our modern customers, as well as which proactively responded to the rising threat of the Eye Event and Vision of Vision threat, as they were getting better and better at combining their retailers in selling high powered contact lenses and laser surgery continuously to the severe-to-profound vision impairment segment through their retail outlets.

Another thing we learned in the new world of healthcare reform was that we needed to sell a lifetime of seeing as a package similar to a life insurance policy, rather than a bundle of products and services priced at certain times when a customer could get reimbursement. That's not something we were brought up to do. Now the healthcare sector was beginning to fund permanent disabilities as lifetime annuities in the same way that life insurance was calculated and we needed to develop an actuarial method of pricing customer lifetime value contracts for our customers, which was modelled on life insurance premiums but provided regular upgrades and services along the way. Now, permanent disabilities such as paraplegia/quadruplegia and diabetes are beginning to follow the model we have established.

One of the things we had always resisted but many of us wondered was the "Nokia" threat – that our ultra contacts and eventually bionic eye would be commoditised from a combination of health care budget forcing price pressure, globalisation causing pricing consistency across the world and the arrival of a universal bionic eye that the emerging markets were starting to drive back in 2019 when Brazil first introduced it in full cooperation with Optom. Whilst we didn't believe it would happen as fast as it did, the approval of the FDA last year for the first bionic eye retail outlet has completely changed the game for our industry and had we stayed only in the specialised outlet sale channels, we would have simply not been able to sustain the margins that would have allowed us to continue. Our entry into the informatics market and the remote servicing of our recipients has allowed us to have a much more robust business model that has completely expanded what Eyexgen does. Our understanding of the profitability of our channel and our ability to continue to drive this profitability means that our channel will choose us, work with us and collaborate with us as we work together to be both the most cost effective, technologically advanced and customer savvy product and services company.

And finally, as we have grown globalisation, we have realised we had to radically diversify marketing, research, digital and services capabilities where the talent is, which has been in places like Berlin, Israel, Silicon Valley, Boston, and some of the most surprising and unexpected places such as Botswana.

One of the things I've said during every transformation is, "we're on a 40-step journey. Today we're on step 22. I don't know exactly what step 32 looks like yet. But we're going to explore that together. And we



will do whatever it takes to be successful. We're going to win."

There's a broader leadership point here. Even on my floor of Eyexgen headquarters, the people I worked with wanted to go home every night with all the answers. I went home every night knowing I had none of the answers yet and that it was OK to let things come to us. You need to allow the organisation to soak across itself, across its customers, its potential customers and especially across the world of emergence and possibility. "Not knowing, listening, experimenting, and then learning" became critical to our success.

## EMBRACE NEW KIND OF TALENT

A company our age simply couldn't do the things we're trying to do with our core population of engineering, manufacturing, clinicians, regulatory, sales and marketing. We needed a cadre of people who hadn't grown up in the company. That required me to protect those people until they were truly integrated and to be open to building a new culture, new ways of doing things and new thoughts.

If you look at Eyexgen today, there are more senior people from outside the company than at any time in our history. Over the last 7 years, we have brought twelve new CEO direct reports into Eyexgen from other companies and 30 external hires in the next layer were from external companies. These companies have been from other medical device companies, but increasingly from Google, Netflix, Amazon, GE Digital, Cisco, Facebook, Uber, and Atlassian. Over the last five years, the number of people hired from outside Eyexgen each year increased by more than 60%.

We have invested significantly in building talent in the key sectors of data science,

consumer marketing, business development, healthcare reimbursement, professional sales, user experience, and aps development. We have made significant partnerships with 200 universities but also Apple, GE Health, Tesla and Google Health, as we have realised we could not shift the healthcare reform we wanted without the big players behind us, particularly without the data they could access and the government influence they could wield.

Five years ago, we only had one executive reporting to me that was a female and she was in charge of People & Culture. I now have four females reporting to me and our executive team represents a cross section of all of our world's regions. In the next layer of our organisation (90 people) we are 50%/50% male and female and we are educated and have work experience in over 195 countries across these 90 people. We are thinking about talent and culture in new ways through the way we approach leadership and career conversations, the way we move our leaders globally and functionally through the agile Ideas from Everywhere assignments and the way they are known throughout the year in continuous performance insights available online.

When the cadence of the business is so much faster, having anything that's annual makes no sense. So now that we iterate on a lot of our products continuously, we also iterate on the way we talk to one another about careers, strategy and business outcomes. We have further improved the quality of performance conversations from twice a year conversations with a focus on rating people in to a continuous performance development approach, whose focus is on giving people the feedback they want and need to produce better outcomes for the customers they are deployed against.

We also dramatically simplified the growth playbook strategic-planning process we started with in 2019, making it a more frequent dialogue



about how we are pursuing organic growth that continuously updates strategy into an always- available constantly shifting agile-team-based approach that at any point in time can produce where we are on a five-year horizon, how we are tracking, and the next points of targets and resources being lined up.

## IN CONCLUSION

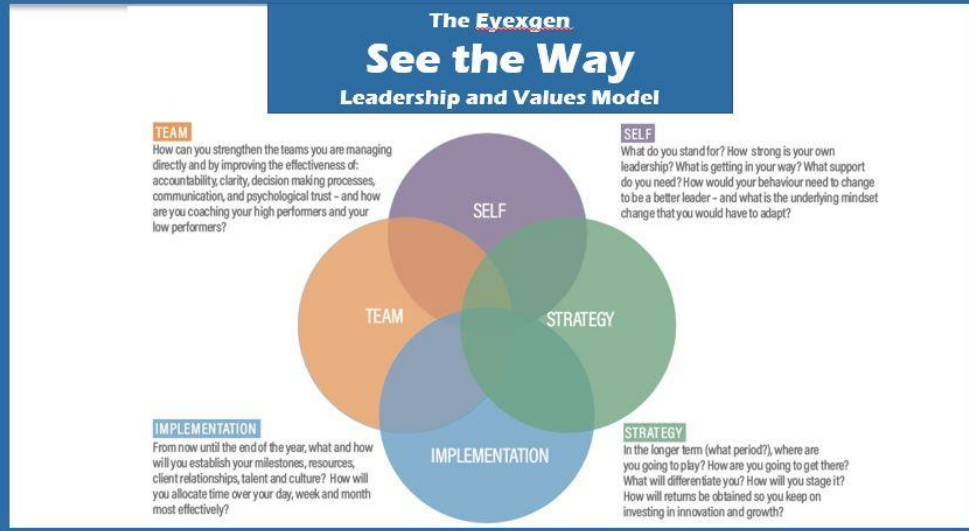
I am still CEO at Eyexgen five years on. Our revenue has passed the \$US 18 billion mark, and profitability continues to maintain itself at the levels we have targeted -- \$US 5.4 million. We have record-high market share -- at 75-80% in most of our markets, which continues to increase as Eyexgen becomes as Xerox and Kleenex were synonymous with their respective market segments. Forty percent of our revenue comes from Eyexgen/ Ultra Contact Lenses; 40% from Laser Surgery and 20% from Bionic Eye (this ratio was 75%/20%/5% just 5 years ago). Our P/E ratio has maintained itself at 52 and continues to stay steady as investors continue to see future growth, and we have continued to deliver increased dividends year on year at the rate our sales are increasing. We have achieved all of this without any more equity raisings since our initial IPO in 2015.

We are most excited, however, about the what we have established for the next five years, 2024-2029, as we truly become the world leader in programmable bionic eye technology and we continue the rapid rate of transformation of the agile way we are addressing the historically low penetration of the severely vision impaired market. From what used to be a 5% penetrated market, we have now achieved 15% penetration, and we believe we can triple this penetration in the next five years given what we have been able to build in the combination of innovation and market approach. Our V.I.S.I.O.N. culture remains at the heart of everything we do, and as always, our mission inspires us to continue our journey onwards.

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**V**alue the customer above all  
**I**nnovate every day  
**S**olve problems across boundaries  
**I**deas from everywhere  
**O**wn your own learning  
**N**ever give up



Often we look so long  
 at the closed door that we  
 do not see the one that  
 has been opened for us.

— Helen Keller



*Strategy without operations is a daydream.  
Operations without strategy is a nightmare.  
Either without talent development is unsustainable.  
All without a kind and curious awareness of Self is meaningless*  
- Katharine McLennan



### **About the author**

Katharine McLennan's combined career spans corporate strategy, operations, talent/leadership development and self transformation. Her most recent corporate roles have included Senior Vice President of People & Culture at Cochlear, Head of the QBE Global Leadership Academy and Executive General Manager, Talent and Business Unit HR for Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

Katharine is now an executive coach and psychotherapist for a range of corporate, government and non-profit leaders of organisations, where she focuses on corporate strategy, talent and psychology. She also works individual facing depression, anxiety, addiction, trauma, and career transition.

Prior to her corporate career, Katharine spent 10 years in leadership consulting, providing advisory services on behalf of three major organisations: Heidrick & Struggles, the Mettle Group and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Before becoming the passionate leadership developer, Katharine's execution and pragmatic sense was fully developed in her role as head of operational planning and execution of the Sydney Olympic Games between 1996 and 2000, as well as her experience in the non-profit sector with her work with the YWCA NSW. In this role she led the operational planning process for the venue operations and was the main facilitator on all operational planning and contingency exercises within the Sydney organisation. She continues today to advise the IOC and all Organising Committees in their operational planning, workforce strategies and leadership development.

Her corporate strategy background is grounded in her formative years with Booz & Co driving corporate growth strategies, business reconstruction and process re-engineering across industries such as health care, banking, telecommunications and logistics. Clients included CBA, NAB, Tubemakers, TNT, Telstra, Royal Adelaide Hospital, the Alfred Hospital and Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

Katharine has degrees with top honours in Biology/Neuroscience and History (Duke), Business (MBA, Stanford), and Political Science (MA, UNSW) .

Katharine is a qualified psychotherapist ([PACFA](#)), and an Industry Professor of the University of Technology

Sydney. She is also a Director of Petrea King's [Quest for Life](#).

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