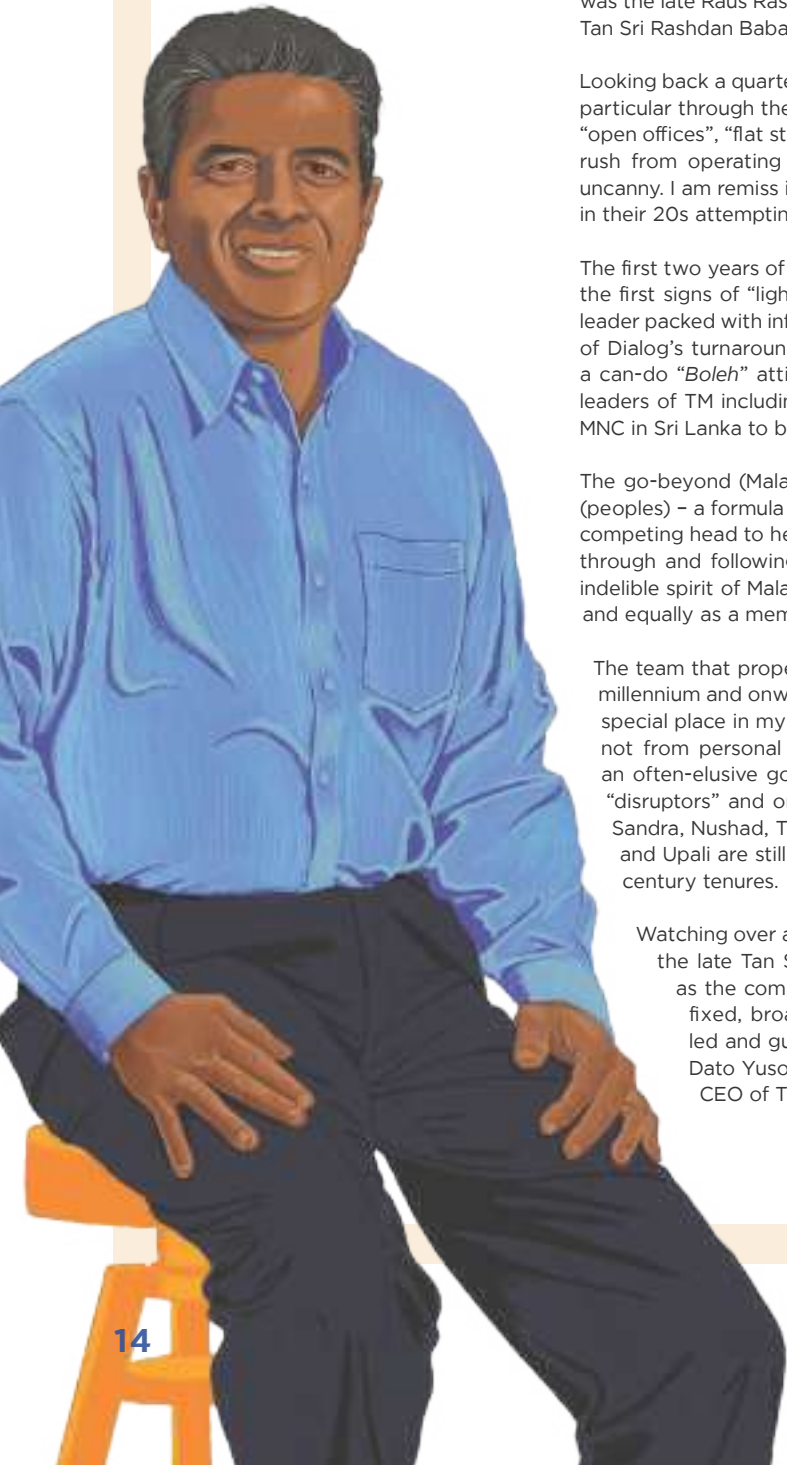


**“The Axiata story is unique in many ways. Central to the story is positivism, innovation and disruption on the foundation of a deep humanity which respects people and diversity.”**

### *Dr Hans Wijayasuriya*

CEO – Telecommunications Business / Group EVP, 2020 – Present  
Corporate EVP & Regional CEO, South Asia, Axiata, 2016 – 2020  
CEO, Dialog, 1997 – 2016  
CEO, Axiata Digital, 2012 – 2014



The invite to pen a reflection on my life at Axiata poignantly coincided with the milestone of completing 25 years with the Group.

It all began around a small, round table in a derelict building in downtown Colombo. I happened to be the third employee on record of the fourth entrant to Sri Lanka’s mobile sector. A joint venture between Telekom Malaysia and the Maharaja Organisation of Sri Lanka. Our CEO then was the late Raus Rashid. The Board of MTN Networks (as it was then known) was chaired by Tan Sri Rashdan Baba, the Chair of TM, and included Dato Mohd Said, the CEO of TM.

Looking back a quarter of a century to those early years from the vantage of the present – in particular through the lens of today’s entrepreneurship vocabulary of “startup”, “disruption”, “open offices”, “flat structures”, “seed investors”, “risk capital” and importantly the adrenaline rush from operating at the edge of bankruptcy - the parallels and similarities are truly uncanny. I am remiss in not adding to the list a team of hungry and inexperienced individuals in their 20s attempting to cut through an incumbent dominated market.

The first two years of Dialog’s journey were punctured by the usual startup pains. Then came the first signs of “light” with Dato Zaini Diman – the CEO appointed in 1996 – an inimitable leader packed with infectious enthusiasm and deep-set trust in his team. Zaini was the “pivot” of Dialog’s turnaround and the company I inherited as CEO in 1997 was one charged with a can-do “Boleh” attitude. Uniquely, and stemming from the vision and foresight of senior leaders of TM including Dato Said, Nor Hisham and the late Nor Zainal, Dialog was the first MNC in Sri Lanka to be empowered with a largely localised management team.

The go-beyond (Malaysia) formula of the 1990s was unique in its respect for fellow Asians (peoples) – a formula of co-creation and mutual learning, and realisation of Asian Champions competing head to head with those from advanced nations. The war cry of “Malaysia Boleh” through and following the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 remains etched in my mind. This indelible spirit of Malaysia continues to be a source of personal inspiration – first as an Asian and equally as a member of a Malaysian corporate family.

The team that propelled Dialog from No. 4 to No. 1 in the three years leading into the new millennium and onwards to becoming Sri Lanka’s first USD1 billion market cap retains a very special place in my mind (and heart). My admiration and affection for these leaders stems not from personal affinity but from their innate capability to work relentlessly towards an often-elusive goal, putting team and company before self. Some of these pioneering “disruptors” and organisation builders from amongst the likes of Razak, Mothilal, Anoja, Sandra, Nushad, Thivanka, Samsu, Omar, Rosman, Wan Zaidan, Supun, Pradeep, Shayam and Upali are still with us in the Axiata Group, and will soon clock up their own quarter-century tenures.

Watching over and guiding us with wisdom and inimitable warmth was our father figure the late Tan Sri Radzi – Dialog’s Chairman for nine years spanning the IPO as well as the company’s transition from a mobile market leader to a quad player across fixed, broadband and television businesses. We also had the privilege of being led and guided by acutely tenacious strategists and sharp-shooting executors in Dato Yusof, the head of International Ventures, and Tan Sri Wahid Omar the then CEO of TM.



The crystallisation of the Axiata Group in 2008 through its demerger from TM signified a visionary and precise articulation of a regional (Asian) champion under the leadership of Tan Sri Jamal. A vision which built upon the Malaysia Inc value system to establish a unique MNC formula which embraced diversity and placed at its centre the “people”, alongside integrity and performance ideals second to none. A vision which today, continues to be lived and enriched by pioneer members of the Senior Leadership Team, Datin Badrunisa, Azwan, Gim and Suryani alongside Darke, Yap, Annis, Dominic, Vivek, Anthony, Asri and Hadi who have strengthened the team over the years to follow.

I have been fortunate to have worked closely with Tan Sri Jamal over the past decade and will be repeating what I am sure will be etched in every page of this book when I say that Axiata is inseparable from his deep-set humanity – meaning that the organisation he has created along with his SLT and country CEOs and leadership teams, is one which cares for people – not only within the companies we manage, but across the communities we serve and the nation-building stories we are proud to be a part of. Aply, Axiata’s tag line resounds - Advancing Asia. For those of us not of Malaysian origin, and our in-country teams, the opportunity to deliver transformation and advancement to the lives of our own nations and people has been rich reward.

Dialog’s second wave was spawned by the shock of a perfect storm in 2007 – an unholy mix of a heightened civil war, global oil crisis, inflation and interest rates in the mid-twenties, and a brutal price war. The two years to follow proved to be the most trying, and also the most educative, in my career. I believe the same goes for many others in the Dialog team who implemented a rebound from “hero to zero to hero again” - to use the narrative of the business media.

The learnings from this phase of our journey could fill a book of their own – but central to the rebound were the fundamentals of recognising and “owning” mistakes early and proactively, the importance of transparency and accountability of leaders, and the invaluable ingredient of shareholder trust combined with the support of the wider Axiata team. I recount with gratitude the encouragement and trust extended to us by Tan Sri Azman Mokhtar and the Axiata Board throughout these most trying of times. Pivotal to the “rebound” and the exponential trajectory to follow was the leadership of Datuk Azzat and stewardship of the Dialog Board which, as a construct, was and continues to be unique in terms of the rich diversity and wisdom of its independent directors. Moksevi Prelis (a leading banker) and Mohamed Muhsin (former CIO of the World Bank) have each contributed in excess of a decade towards Dialog’s progress.

The learnings from the downturn were not wasted and a re-shaped and invigorated Dialog never looked back. The value of refreshed leadership came to the fore in the form of Azwan, Suresh, Amali, Lucy, Anthony and Jerry, all key players in the Group Axiata Senior Leadership today. Dialog catapulted on the energy of its rebound to subsequently become the most profitable integrated telco and highest valued brand in Sri Lanka.

Commencing in 2014 Tan Sri’s Jamal’s passion for leadership talent development saw fruition with the spawning of new leaders from within Axiata’s talent pool. Supun, Dian, Suresh, Khairil, Mahtab and Idham took on the reins of OpCo leadership and are today at the forefront of Axiata’s battle for regional supremacy.

The pinnacle of Dialog’s second wave was the CEO transition in 2017 following which Supun and his team have elevated Dialog to a position of internal and external strength far surpassing what I could have ever achieved – a source of singular pride and the best reward I could have received.

Creation as well as reinvention have been powerful DNA strands innate to the Axiata ethos. The pioneering team at Axiata Digital I had the privilege of working with during 2013 and 2014 have made bold and disruptive strides under Khairil’s leadership to prove that a telco is in no way disqualified from being a leader in disruption. Today, I have the privilege of learning from and working with great leaders and teams across our MNOs in Bangladesh and Nepal, as well as the Digital Transformation and Enterprise domains across the Group.

The snippets I have recounted are in no way a comprehensive account of the achievements of this great company. I hope, however, that one could extract from my sketch and the rest of this book the fact that the Axiata story is unique in many ways. Central to the story is positivism, innovation and disruption on the foundation of a deep humanity which respects people and diversity.

There is no “one right way” to build a multi-national champion. I believe however that there is an “Asian way” which is founded on human-centred Asian value systems, and on this landscape the Malaysian model stands tall among peers. Successive leaders of the TM and Axiata Group have lived up to and beyond the ideal of this model in creating a regional digital champion which is globally competitive. It is my humble wish that we continue to live up to these ideals and continue to exceed the expectations of our leaders, Tan Sri Ghazzali, Tan Sri Jamal, Dato’ Izzaddin and the Board of the Axiata Group, as we continue to advance Asia into the next decade.