

CORNER OFFICE

Eileen Fisher: ‘When Was Fashion Week?’

The founder of her namesake clothing line drew inspiration from the kimono and never looked back. Today she oversees her company with a light touch and steers clear of the fashionista set.

By David Gelles

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Eileen Fisher, the woman, is not chief executive of Eileen Fisher, the company.

Indeed, Eileen Fisher the company — which for more than three decades has made simple, flowing women’s clothes in neutral tones and earthy fabrics — does not have a C.E.O.

The unconventional leadership structure reflects Ms. Fisher’s belief that consensus is more important than urgency and that collaboration is more effective than hierarchy. Or something like that.

Ms. Fisher, 68, offers elliptical, impressionistic answers when explaining her improbable career. She grew up in a chaotic home and worked at a Burger King as a teenager. She moved to New York, but she was inspired by the kimono during a trip to Japan. She bootstrapped her company, caught an early break and has been making the same clothes, more or less, since 1984.

Yet for all eccentricities, her success is undeniable. Eileen Fisher, which is privately held by Ms. Fisher and her employees, has annual sales of roughly \$500 million and is still growing. And at a moment when many consumers are willing to pay a premium for quality, sustainability and durability, the company’s longstanding values are deeply relevant.

This interview, which was condensed and edited for clarity, was conducted at Eileen Fisher’s offices in New York City.

Tell me about your childhood.

It was a fairly chaotic household of girls, but it was fun.

Why was it chaotic?

I think it started with my mother being a little chaotic. She was overwhelmed. But she loved to sew. She loved fabric and clothes. The one time that my mother was happy was

when she was sewing. She would take me to fabric stores and she'd be like, "Look at this, Eileen!"

I read somewhere that you had to wear a uniform in school.

I didn't like it at the time, but if I look back, I think, "It was sure easy." When I first came to New York, I was trying to work as a designer and trying to look like a designer. But I was struggling to put myself together. It was just overwhelming. I felt clothes were too complicated, especially women's clothes, always changing. I just needed to look good, and I needed to not think too much about it.

What was your first job?

I worked in Burger King when I was 15, and that was interesting. Having a boss telling you what to do all the time was kind of strange for me. In my house, no one told anyone what to do. You just tried to pull it together and get yourself to school. My mother would sort of yell. But that's a different story. Where was I going with this?

Having a boss.

Having a boss. As a family we were sort of fluid. We shared, we did things together. And then work was like, "Do this. And when you finish that, do this." I hated it. I hated it. I had a definite authority problem.

Is that why you're your own boss now?

I wanted to create a place where people weren't powering over people. Where people were kind, and people were together and shared.

So you came to New York?

I started in interior design. I struggled, I really struggled. I had a Japanese partner. We did graphics together and ended up going to Japan. That's how I found the kimono.

Did you know the kimono was something special to you when you saw it for the first time?

I did. I was very intrigued by the way it moved. I went to Kyoto and saw the women wearing the kimonos. And just to watch a couple of them walking: There were the colors, and the shape, and that was the same shape for like a thousand years in Japan. It was the only shape they wore. I was fascinated by that idea that one design, one shape, could transcend time, and be made new just by different patterns and colors.

So how did you start the company?

It was some kind of bizarre synergy and synchronicity of events. I had \$350 in my bank account when I decided to start the business. But this pattern maker came and helped me. I cut the pieces on the floor in my loft, carried it all out on the subway in garbage bags to a little factory in Queens. People were kind, people helped. Then at a boutique show, I sold \$40,000 worth of clothes.

At that point you had a real business going. What was it like to become a boss?

I still struggle with that. I don't think being a boss is my strength. I think of myself as leading through the idea, trying to help people understand what I'm trying to do, or what the project is about, and engaging them. I always think about leading through listening. I was a designer, so I didn't have preconceived ideas of how this business works. And I was kind of lucky to not know.

'We were right all along.'

— Eileen Fisher

But you've figured out how to be C.E.O. all these years.

Well, I never officially called myself C.E.O. I'm a little uncomfortable with that title. I used to call myself chief creative officer, because I always felt like I was leading from the creative sense.

So does this company have a C.E.O.?

No, not really. We have a leadership group, and we have a board, and I'm the founder and chairwoman of the board, but that's not really what I do.

This is unusual.

It's very unusual.

When people join this company, how do you get them acclimated to this?

It's very hard. You want what they bring from the outside, but you don't want to lose the magic of this strangely, almost egoless kind of company. That's a weird thing to say, because it's not totally true. It's weird when you say something, and you're like, "Was that really true?" How does it all work?

Does this kind of decentralized decision making work at a big company?

I think the jury's out, and I think it can. I have a lot of belief. I feel like that's part of my role right now. I understood when the clothes were starting to go off: too many patterns, too many different styles, too much complexity, it's not really our line. I get alarmed when I see it go off. In the same way, I get alarmed when I feel the culture is not quite working right.

But I think the idea of co-creation and collaboration absolutely can work in a big company. How do we understand the gifts and the talents of each person in the room? How do we put that puzzle together in the same way as we put the puzzle of the clothes together?

Wow, that was a long-winded ramble. But I think the point I was trying to make is that when things go off, and they always do, at first I kind of get depressed. It's like, "Oh, no! How did that happen again?" And then I'm like, "No, no, right! I need to remember: In the middle of the problem is the possibility."

You have a reputation as being a brand for older women. How are you trying to change that?

We opened a store in Brooklyn.

It was just Fashion Week. Do you do anything for Fashion Week?

When was Fashion Week?

It seems like some of the principles you've always stood for — sustainability, quality materials — are suddenly in vogue now.

We were right all along.

What are this company's values?

Timeless designs, sustainability, simplicity. We have something called "the system": eight basic pieces, and then we add a couple and take a couple away each season, and just evolve that basic system of wardrobe.

We did a little survey with our customers and asked what magazines and newspapers they read. The only thing they would consistently admit to was The New York Times and The New Yorker. They're not Vogue readers.

You provide very generous benefits, and employees own much of the company now.

I'm really convinced that it works for the business. It engages people and their sense of ownership, and they'll tell you things. They'll say in a meeting, "Don't spend my money on that." People aren't happy when they see people wasting money here or there or being extravagant on something.

It's a way we can do our part around this income inequality thing. I think it should be mandatory. I think corporations should have to share a minimum 10 percent of their profits with the people working. It's not socialism, it's good for business.

O.K.

I want to say one other thing. When I was at the Aspen Institute, I was interviewed by Kevin O'Leary. You know who he is? From "Shark Tank"?

You could not be two more different personalities.

I know. But what he said is that he's investing in women's businesses 70 percent of the time. And the reason, he said, was because women are more likely to be more realistic in their plans and meet their goals. They're more successful because they think long term.

Will you retire?

I've been trying to retire for 10 years. I took a month off this summer, and I've reorganized my way of thinking about how I'm going to work. I will retire when I feel it's safe.