Kelman, who has flown planes for 20-plus years, points out parallels between her skills as a pilot and her success as a consumer products executive. “When you fly on instruments you’re staring at probably six gauges and 25 pieces of information,” she explains. “I’ve become very good at cutting through high complexity to get to the couple of essential things you need to do to take off and land successfully. It’s a defining aspect of who I’ve become on the job, too, and has made me a better business person.”

Another valuable tactic in piloting a plane and leading a business: “I always have a plan B before I take off. If things don’t go perfectly, I know how to assess the situation quickly and get myself out of trouble,” she says.

But, unlike in piloting, Kelman never operates solo as a business leader. “Investing in people and their development can make an enormous difference in company performance,” she says.

Kelman is a concentrated ball of energy who radiates enthusiasm as a team leader and always seems fully engaged in the conversation she’s having and the person she’s talking with. But don’t let that distract you from noticing her business acumen, which can be stunning, admirers say.

For proof, see Kelman’s extraordinary track record at her previous employer, Johnson & Johnson. As president of its LifeScan–North America division, maker of OneTouch, a product that help diabetes patients accurately monitor their blood sugar levels, she managed to turn around a declining market leader and put it on a high-growth trajectory in less than a year. “I persuaded people that we were on a journey of transformation,” she says.

Before that, as leader of the firm’s Vision Care–Americas division, which makes Acuvue contact lenses, she took a number-one brand whose growth had stagnated and catapulted it into the double digits in less than five years by introducing a new business model and reenergizing the staff.
What does it take to effect a turnaround? “I’ve found that when you get to be a number-one brand, you can get bogged down playing defense instead of offense,” Kelman says. “You don’t want to get knocked from the top spot, so you spend most of your time defending what you have instead of creating that new path to the future. You lose touch with the things that made you great — taking risks, having vision, delighting your consumer in a way that nobody had before. Leaders need to create a path where one didn’t exist — like walking on freshly fallen snow — and inspire people to want to be on it,” she says.

“When I met Naomi I was immediately impressed by her keen knowledge of the marketplace and what it takes to drive growth,” says Don Casey, a former Johnson & Johnson executive who is both a mentor and a sponsor to Kelman. “I could tell she was going to make whatever organization she managed successful, and invariably she did. She is a natural leader, with keen analytical skills, marketing acuity, and a good sense of how to inspire others,” says Casey, who is now CEO of West Wireless Health Institute.

“What really stands out is Naomi’s vision for changing the status quo,” says Bill Ross, field sales director at LifeScan, who also worked with Kelman at Vision Care. “She pushes herself and her people to envision a better future and to think big about how to innovate.”

**Inspiring greatness**

Kelman wins her teams over by persuading them they can do great things. “Developing people is sometimes stretching them, really believing in them, even when they don’t believe in themselves; empowering them but still being that coach,” she says.

“Naomi is incredibly skillful at identifying talent and potential in others,” says Ty Lee, vice president, global analytics and customer insights, Johnson & Johnson Diabetes Care. “She creates an inclusive environment where diverse styles, talents, and ideas are encouraged and embraced. And she is supportive of promoting people into bigger and better assignments, which leads to products that better meet customer needs and fuel business growth.”
Profile in Leadership

“She is an amazing developer of people at all levels,” adds Valerie Asbury, vice president of sales at LifeScan, who worked with Kelman there and at Vision Care. If you come in with an idea, she’ll help you think it out and make it even bigger. She’ll say: ‘I need you to feel as confident about you as I feel about you.’”

Although she believes that there are as many ways to be a leader as there are good leaders, Kelman shared four essential strategies that have served her well when she visited Johnson in February. Get great people. Know your business. Do fewer things, but do them bigger and better. And her favorite: Challenge people to be innovative.

“Creating a safe environment for innovation is really what you need to do to get the greatness out of the people who work for you, which is ultimately what drives growth,” she told her audience.

Mentoring matters

Kelman grew up in a suburb of Washington, D.C., the oldest of four sisters. Encouraged to do whatever interested her by supportive parents, she took courses in a range of disciplines as a Cornell undergraduate, including astronomy with Carl Sagan, before enrolling in Johnson’s MBA program in 1981. There, she discovered her love of marketing in classes with Professor Vithala Rao, and found the fun in competition playing for the Frozen Assets women’s ice hockey team, which she co-founded.

Then, after a brief stint in finance at American Express following graduation, she joined Bristol-Myers Squibb’s Clairol division as an assistant brand manager in consumer marketing in New York City and met her calling. “I liked seeing a product you worked on show up on the shelf at Walgreen’s, and calling. ‘I liked seeing a product you worked on show up on the shelf at Walgreen’s, and calling.”

Her leadership potential was spotted by Steve Sadove, then president of Clairol (he is now CEO of Saks and Co.), who boosted her confidence by talking candidly with her about the challenges of running the business and who encouraged her to seek positions of increasing responsibility. “It made such an impression on me that he would invest in me and share those ideas,” says Kelman.

Encouraged by Sadove to transfer to the firm’s London office, she went on to oversee the global expansion of some of the company’s biggest consumer brands. Eventually, she rose to become vice president of marketing for Bristol-Myers Squibb’s Matrix Essentials, an international hair-care products business now owned by L’Oréal. The exposure was invaluable in terms of helping her view the world through a broader lens, which, in turn, opened doors for her at Johnson & Johnson and Novartis, she says.

A passion for people

Grateful for the confidence, advice and support of seasoned executives like Sadove and Casey, Kelman now “pays it forward” by making time to mentor and sponsor others.

“Naomi has a passion for her people,” says Ross, whom Kelman sponsors. “A few years ago, when my daughter Annie was two years old, she was diagnosed with a serious heart ailment and I was having difficulty focusing on work. Naomi not only helped connect us to medical experts but she also told me, ‘You are valued, and we want you to take care of your family.’ That one comment did so much to give me some real peace at a time when we were sick with worry about the future,” says Ross, whose daughter is now fully recovered.

View from the top

Kelman is excited her new position comes with a seat on Novartis’s executive committee, which reports directly to the CEO in Basel, Switzerland. And she’s thrilled by the sheer size of Novartis, a giant in the international healthcare-products field, which will likely grow even bigger via acquisitions such as the $12.9 billion purchase of Alcon, a vision-health products firm. She even welcomes working once again with over-the-counter products that require FDA approval, as she did at Johnson & Johnson. “I’m not easily intimidated by difficult things,” she asserts. “I love adventures and challenges, the harder the better. I embrace the situation.”

But for a person who enjoys engaging people as much as Kelman does, being a leader can be lonely at times, she admits. “When you’re faced with tough choices, there aren’t a lot of peers to have conversations with,” she says. “I’m aware I’ve sometimes made decisions that not everybody agreed with, but I believed they were the right things to do to create a future for the company and its employees. As a leader you have to be willing to do that because people are counting on you.”

As her career continues to take her to new heights, she may also find the view from the top to be just as exhilarating as it was the first time she flew a plane. “I remember taking off from Teterboro airport in New Jersey, flying down the Hudson River, around the Statue of Liberty and back,” she recalls. “I looked down and said, ‘What a lovely view,’ and that was it for me. I was hooked for life.”