ELON MUSK

# A Study in Leadership

Drawn from *Elon Musk* by Walter Isaacson

Simon & Schuster, 2023



# Entrepreneurial and Professional Highlights;

*Founder or leader of companies that reshaped payments, space, cars and AI*

### PayPal — 1999

Cofounded X.com, which became PayPal; sold to eBay for $1.5B in 2002

### SpaceX — 2002

First reusable orbital rockets; first private company to fly NASA astronauts to the ISS; Starlink

### Tesla — 2004

Took electric cars mainstream and built Tesla into the world's most valuable automaker

### Neuralink — 2016

Brain computer interface now implanted in patients; also cofounded The Boring Company

### X — 2022

Bought Twitter for $44B and rebuilt it as X

### xAI — 2023

Launched Grok; merged with SpaceX in 2026 at a combined $1.25T valuation

Years show when Musk founded, joined or acquired each venture. Sources: company histories; Forbes and CNBC reporting (2026).

# Humiliation on the Tesla Factory Floor

Gage Coffin, a young engineer in his first job, had worked seven days a week for eleven months. Summoned over a misaligned part, he asked Musk what exactly he meant.

> *Did you f***ing do this? … You're an idiot. Get the hell out and don't come back.*

**Elon Musk**
to manufacturing engineer Gage Coffin, Tesla

Source: Walter Isaacson, Elon Musk (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

# Pulling the Plug on His Brother

Elon had invested in Kimbal Musk's restaurants. After his finance team reviewed them, he delivered the verdict.

> *The restaurants are struggling. I think they should die.*

**Elon Musk**
to his brother

> *If you would've looked at Tesla finance, it should have died as well.*

**Kimbal Musk**
who had backed Tesla when it was struggling

Source: Walter Isaacson, Elon Musk (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

# Tools That Wear Out

A longtime SpaceX executive on what working for Musk demands.

> *You definitely realize that you're a tool being used to achieve this larger objective… But sometimes, tools get worn down and he feels he can just replace that tool.*

**Tim Hughes**
former general counsel, SpaceX

Source: Walter Isaacson, Elon Musk (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

# Cutting Off Family at SolarCity

Tesla bought his cousins' SolarCity for $2.6 billion in 2016. Facing a shareholder lawsuit, Musk fired the cousins, Lyndon and Peter Rive.

> *I f***ing hate my cousins. I don't think I will ever speak to them again.*

**Elon Musk**
to Kunal Girotra, head of Tesla Energy

**4**

heads of Tesla Energy hired and fired in five years

*Girotra was one of them*

Source: Walter Isaacson, Elon Musk (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

# Losing the Boss's Confidence

A Tesla engineer who had worked beside Musk building the Nevada battery factory.

> *He knows that I can kick ass… But he thought I was losing my edge, even though I had missed my birthday with my family to be up on that roof with him.*

**Brian Dow**
engineer, Tesla

Source: Walter Isaacson, Elon Musk (Simon & Schuster, 2023)

# Steve Jobs: Rise, Exile and Return

*Three phases of Jobs's career, and how Musk's path compares*

01 1976 TO 1985

## The Rise

Cofounds Apple in a garage, launches the Apple II and Macintosh. Visionary but abrasive; his own board pushes him out at 30.

**ELON PARALLEL**

Similar founder temperament. Musk was also ousted, as CEO of X.com in 2000, but went straight on to SpaceX and Tesla.

02 1985 TO 1997

## The Wilderness

Founds NeXT and buys Pixar. NeXT struggles, but Toy Story succeeds. He learns patience, team building and humility.

**ELON PARALLEL**

Musk's crucible was 2008, when Tesla and SpaceX nearly failed. He kept control, so he never had a true exile.

03 1997 TO 2011

## The Return

Rejoins Apple and delivers the iMac, iPod, iPhone and iPad. Still demanding, but now builds a strong team and a successor.

**ELON PARALLEL**

Musk's power has only grown, now at a $1.25T SpaceX and xAI. Whether he tempers his style remains open.

**The lesson:** *Jobs's exile made him a better leader. Musk has never been forced to step back.*

Sources: Walter Isaacson, Steve Jobs (2011) and Elon Musk (2023); Forbes and CNBC reporting (2026).

# Elon Musk: Career Timeline

*From internet startups to rockets, electric cars and AI*

**1971** — Born in Pretoria, South Africa

**1995** — Cofounds Zip2; sold to Compaq in 1999 for $307M

**1999** — Starts X.com, which becomes PayPal; eBay buys it for $1.5B in 2002

**2002** — Founds SpaceX

**2004** — Leads Tesla's Series A; becomes CEO in 2008

**2008** — Falcon 1 reaches orbit; Tesla Roadster ships

**2012** — Dragon is the first commercial craft to dock with the ISS

**2015** — Falcon 9 lands an orbital booster; cofounds OpenAI

**2016** — Cofounds Neuralink and The Boring Company

**2020** — Crew Dragon flies NASA astronauts to the ISS

**2022** — Buys Twitter for $44B, later renamed X

**2023** — Founds xAI; Starship makes its first test flight

**2025** — Leads the DOGE federal cost cutting effort

**2026** — SpaceX acquires xAI, valuing the combined company at $1.25T

Highlighted: founding SpaceX, joining Tesla, and the 2026 SpaceX and xAI merger. Sources: company histories; Forbes and CNBC reporting (2026).