

Leadership takeaways from Musk's Twitter chaos

The Chief Twit is, unsurprisingly and as advertised, being a twit. It is hard to look at the sight of the world's richest person jeopardising his newly-acquired business, his fearsome reputation and an immense fortune, and not think: "Wow." And not in a good way. I had huge admiration for Elon Musk's success, and I respected the way he earned it.

Through hard work, intelligence and ground-breaking innovation. *Tesla* redefined the auto industry, aspiring not to build the best electric car but the best car in the world, bar none. *Tesla Energy* builds batteries that have, in emergencies, been available to power communities the size of Puerto Rico and the Australian state of Victoria. *SpaceX* and *The Boring Company* are redefining how we travel, as well as where and for how long. *Starlink* has helped sustain Ukraine during an existential struggle, while *Neuralink* aims to integrate the human brain with Artificial Intelligence (AI), merging humans with machines in a way that could cure paralysis, blindness and other disabilities.

Incredibly, one man was the driving force behind the success of all these businesses. Elon Musk's success has previously been the result of breathtaking ingenuity and audacity; leading-edge technological innovation (many inventions were initially deemed impossible); a focus on problems that either we didn't know we had (*The Boring Company*) or that we had thought would take decades to resolve, if we could resolve them at all (*SpaceX*, *Tesla*,

Neuralink), and an entrepreneurial blend of certainty and drive, together with big picture vision and relentless attention to detail.

Now, all those attributes have deserted him as he sacks employees swiftly and without the appearance of much thought, and demands that those who stay commit to a “hard core culture” where “only exceptional performance will constitute a passing grade”. Those sackings and demands together are resulting in an exodus of talent that is jeopardising the business. No one is available, for example, to speak with the media to scotch unfounded rumours, and more importantly no one is available to explain to users or customers (advertisers) what is happening, why, and where it is all heading.

Clearly, despite his many achievements there are several leadership lessons from Musk’s acquisition of Twitter.

First, what got you here won’t get you there. The skills which ensure success in one arena (starting a car company) rarely translate to another (managing a social media business). Musk’s successes have several things in common yet none seem relevant for Twitter.

The next lesson is understand the shadow cast by your leadership. Either Musk does not know how he comes across, or does not care, or both. All would be mistakes. Effective leaders understand that how they act and what they say, prioritise and measure all matter. Great leaders are open, aware of their failings and keen to learn – especially in times of challenge and change.

Failing to manage your personal reputation or to care what people think will repel many that you need to keep onside. Regulators, influencers, employees, individuals, communities and societies all need to respect businesses and CEOs. Twitter is no exception.

Also missing is evidence of long-term thinking and a compelling guiding vision. To have a sustainable future Twitter’s users, customers and employees all need to buy-in to a shared vision, and the CEO needs to provide it. What is Twitter’s?

I suspect Elon won’t agree with this but he needs to encourage diversity, inclusion and teamwork: not just because it’s the right, decent thing to do but because that will result in better decisions. Given that he is such a singular individual it is surely a Musk must to have input from other people who are not fabulously wealthy and can relate to the rest of us.

This connects with the next point: just because you have a large number of followers on Twitter and a bank balance bigger than the GDP of some countries does not make you an expert on everything. Great leaders understand that openness, curiosity and self-awareness go a long way.

Also Musk should avoid overplaying strengths so they become a weakness. His strengths include a singular *startup* vision, and an ability to push away doubters. Is that really what's needed at Twitter now? Is wise counsel not a better course?

Elon Musk reminds us of the need to communicate and connect. People like to be heard (one of the benefits of Twitter), they expect to be informed and they value emotional connection. Yet Musk seems to be doing very little asking, listening, explaining or bonding.

Finally, it is vital to treat customers and communities with respect, yet there is little evidence that customers or people are a priority. For example, how will Musk appeal to advertisers? How will he ensure free speech without pandering to demagogues? How will he build a sustainable business when he is prepared to let over so much of the workforce leave? And how will he reassure people that he has the answers to these questions?

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