

# Tesla: Unsustainable Strategy for a Sustainable Company

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## Introduction

Tesla, Inc. is an American company, run by Elon Musk, that manufactures electric cars and develops new forms of clean energy. Headquartered in Palo Alto, California, Tesla was founded in July 2003. It operates multiple production and assembly plants, including Gigafactory 1 in Nevada, and its main car manufacturing plant, Tesla Factory, in Fremont, California. Today, Tesla sells the Model S, Model X, and Model 3 vehicles, and has recently announced the Model Y, Roadster and Semi vehicles. Within Tesla's product range, there are also rechargeable home energy batteries, solar panels, solar roof tiles, and other energy products.

The mission statement of the company is "to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy." It further states that "the faster the world stops relying on fossil fuels and moves towards a zero-emission future, the better."<sup>1</sup> Given this mission, Tesla has placed an emphasis on expansion into the renewable energy industry.

Tesla currently employs 45,000 workers, and its annual revenue as of March 31st 2019 was \$22.6 billion.<sup>2 3</sup> It controls around half the market share of the US electric car industry, although this industry currently covers only 2% of the total US vehicle market.<sup>4 5</sup> In 2018, Tesla sold around 350,000 vehicles worldwide, more than double its production levels in 2017.<sup>6</sup>

## Research Question

The main focus of this paper is to analyze Tesla's recent underperformance in producing

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<sup>1</sup> "About Tesla | Tesla." About Tesla | Tesla Europe, [www.tesla.com/en\\_EU/about](http://www.tesla.com/en_EU/about).

<sup>2</sup> "Tesla Revenue 2009-2019 | TSLA." Macrotrends, [www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/TSLA/tesla/revenue](http://www.macrotrends.net/stocks/charts/TSLA/tesla/revenue).

<sup>3</sup> Lambert, Fred, et al. "Tesla Has Grown to 45,000 Employees despite Laying off ~4,000 People Earlier This Year." Electrek, 15 Oct. 2018, [electrek.co/2018/10/15/tesla-45000-employees-elon-musk/](http://electrek.co/2018/10/15/tesla-45000-employees-elon-musk/).

<sup>4</sup> Dalal, Siddharth. "2018 EV and Tesla Market Share Update." S1DD.COM, 5 Jan. 2019, [s1dd.com/2019/01/2018-ev-and-tesla-market-share-update/](http://s1dd.com/2019/01/2018-ev-and-tesla-market-share-update/).

<sup>5</sup> Routley, Nick. "Visualizing EV Sales Around the World." Visual Capitalist, 16 Mar. 2019, [www.visualcapitalist.com/electric-vehicle-sales/](http://www.visualcapitalist.com/electric-vehicle-sales/).

<sup>6</sup> Coren, Michael J. "Tesla Reports Record Production Numbers in 2018." *Quartz*, Quartz, 3 Jan. 2019, [qz.com/1513166/tesla-reports-record-production-numbers-in-2018/](http://qz.com/1513166/tesla-reports-record-production-numbers-in-2018/).

its mass-market car, the Model 3. We assert that this failure is due to incorrect staging stemming from bad leadership. Despite the surge in demand for the Model 3, the company has experienced significant challenges in the fulfillment of vehicle orders due to what Musk called a “production hell.”<sup>7</sup> The Model 3 is Tesla’s first affordable sedan, priced far lower than the company’s previous models and targets the middle class to appeal to a broader market.

Prior to the Model 3 production delays, Tesla had shown not only the automobile industry, but the world, that electric vehicles could compete in all aspects with traditional gas-powered vehicles. This has served as both a threat to the traditional automakers’ market share and as a demonstration of the competitiveness of electric vehicles. The success of the Model 3 would have proven to Tesla’s competitors and consumers that the dependency on fossil fuels in the auto industry is unsustainable and unnecessary. However, the recent difficulties in production process have stalled Tesla from achieving this goal.

We aim to answer the following question: **“How can Tesla improve its production performance in both the short term and the long term?”** We will look at Tesla’s current strategy, Musk’s leadership style, and the company’s decision-making process to devise recommendations that can help Tesla improve its production performance. Tesla’s priority, given current struggles, should be delivering their vehicles to as many consumers as possible, capitalizing on their original value proposition. Despite its beginnings as merely an electric vehicle company, it has since diverged its focus to novel prototype vehicles, batteries, solar panels, and autonomous driving. This divergence in focus has hampered the production performance of electric vehicles. Improving Tesla’s production performance would allow the

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<sup>7</sup> @elonmusk. “You'll know as soon as we do. We are deep in production hell 🔥” *Twitter*, 6 Oct. 2017, 1:18PM., <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/916397212891877376?lang=en>

company to meet its ever-growing demand which would accelerate the shift in the automobile industry as well as the world towards a more sustainable way of using and creating energy.

### **Analysis & Hypothesis:**

#### *Leadership & Decision-Making Problems*

Musk's leadership exhibits qualities which severely hinder group decision-making in the following ways. First, he is unable to focus his creative thinking in a productive way. Second, he has a strong tendency to micromanage. These drawbacks in his leadership style result in unilateral decisions made by Musk and a lack of space for group input due to high levels of conformity and groupthink. These flaws in decision-making within Tesla, both at a day-to-day operational level and a forward-thinking strategic level, have been the other main cause for Tesla's impaired strategy and low production performance.

“At one and the same time, Musk is trying to get us to Mars by 2025, create vacuum-powered transport up and down the West Coast, help Mark Zuckerberg put a satellite in space to wire some of the poorest areas of Africa, make safer autonomous cars, build a ginormous battery factory, and purchase a struggling green-tech company he helped launch.”<sup>8</sup> It is clear that Musk and his team follow one of the most important tenets of the promoting creativity: divergent thinking while brainstorming. Musk readily promotes wild ideas to further Tesla's ultimate mission, an electric sustainable world.

However, the next, and equally important, step of being creative is selecting the *best* possible idea for exploitation. Tesla, a company that has only seen three profitable quarters since

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<sup>8</sup>Zetlin, Minda. “Elon Musk and the Dangers of Trying to Do Too Much.” *Inc.com*, Inc., 2 Sept. 2016, [www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/its-time-to-ask-is-elon-musk-trying-to-do-too-much.html](http://www.inc.com/minda-zetlin/its-time-to-ask-is-elon-musk-trying-to-do-too-much.html).

going public in 2015, needs to keep the staging of its strategy focused on economic logic.<sup>9</sup> Musk has consistently disregarded these concerns. Instead, he is described as “an ambitious CEO whose drive to make everything from scratch sometimes impaired his decision-making, leading him to approve expensive projects that failed and delayed production.”<sup>10</sup> During his creative process, Musk should employ more convergent thinking when deciding next steps. This will allow for cost-efficient allocation of Tesla’s limited resources in order to turn a profit. In short, Musk, and Tesla, should be focusing on only funding products with the most economic logic.

Musk also struggles to properly delegate work. Even his top managers feel micromanaged and controlled. One former employee stands up for his style: “when he involves himself in low-level details, it's to enhance execution speed.”<sup>11</sup> However, other managers have “quit or were fired after clashing with the chief executive over Mr. Musk’s insistence on doing things his way.”<sup>12</sup> These managers are often industry experts who provide advice on Tesla’s production that is not well-received. This type of disconfirming expert advice could have prevented major company failures. Within the remaining employees Musk has created a culture of conformity ; those who persist learn to stay quiet and fear his authority. Musk should look to hire those whom he can actually trust, in order to establish a culture of autonomous group decision-making and fight the scourge of groupthink Tesla faces. He can then focus on being a

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<sup>9</sup>O’Kane, Sean. “Tesla Posts Back-to-Back Profits for the First Time.” *The Verge*, The Verge, 30 Jan. 2019, [www.theverge.com/2019/1/30/18203886/tesla-earnings-q1-revenue-profit-record-model-3](http://www.theverge.com/2019/1/30/18203886/tesla-earnings-q1-revenue-profit-record-model-3).

<sup>10</sup>Kolodny, Lora. “Elon Musk’s Extreme Micromanagement Has Wasted Time and Money at Tesla, Insiders Say.” CNBC, CNBC, 21 Oct. 2018, [www.cnbc.com/2018/10/19/tesla-ceo-elon-musk-extreme-micro-manager.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/19/tesla-ceo-elon-musk-extreme-micro-manager.html).

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Wartzman, Rick. “Admire Elon Musk All You Want, but Please Don’t Manage like Him.” *Fortune*, 21 Jan. 2015, [fortune.com/2015/01/21/elon-musk-micromanagement-control/](http://fortune.com/2015/01/21/elon-musk-micromanagement-control/).

leader instead of a manager, and pool everyone's vast individual resources to help solve Tesla's problems more efficiently.<sup>13</sup>

### *Resulting Strategy*

While Musk's creative leadership has driven much of the innovation at Tesla, he still struggles with many of the practical aspects of his role. Musk's leadership style has led to overconfidence in goal setting both in terms of production quantity and delivery timelines. This has been demonstrated by Tesla's struggle to meet production demands for its Model 3 cars and its inability to ever meet an initially promised delivery date. His chronic underestimations have compromised Tesla's long-term profitability and have negatively affected its stock prices in the short-term; the company is now perceived as unreliable.<sup>14</sup> Every delay has had impacts on the company's bottom line, leading to lost revenue and unhappy customers; around 24% of Model 3 orders were cancelled because customers were tired of waiting. Musk does not make short-term, S.M.A.R.T. goals, nor does he account for any buffer time. His ego and the lack of task conflict in the organization lead to these arbitrary predictions becoming real goals that dictate their growth strategy. Moreover, Musk's habit of running his mouth to the media makes these half-baked ideas public before they are entirely developed.

Musk is not only setting unrealistic goals but is also not fully focusing on achieving them. Despite Tesla's consistent failure to meet demand, its strategy over the past few years has been focused on seemingly everything but producing electric cars. In pursuing his personal dreams of creating a better world, Musk has lost focus of his company's main arena; Tesla, first

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<sup>13</sup> Kolodny, Lora. "Elon Musk's Extreme Micromanagement Has Wasted Time and Money at Tesla, Insiders Say." CNBC, CNBC, 21 Oct. 2018, [www.cnbc.com/2018/10/19/tesla-ceo-elon-musk-extreme-micro-manager.html](http://www.cnbc.com/2018/10/19/tesla-ceo-elon-musk-extreme-micro-manager.html).

<sup>14</sup> Sherman, Erik. "5 Reasons Why Elon Musk Should Leave Tesla Now." Inc.com, Inc., 11 Sept. 2018, [www.inc.com/erik-sherman](http://www.inc.com/erik-sherman).

and foremost, is in the business of selling cars. Instead of concentrating on meeting Tesla's production commitments, Musk has been diverting focus to projects like creating infrastructure for an electric world, or even Tesla lifestyle products like surfboards and power banks.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Musk's staging choices have been putting the company's growth in jeopardy. Tesla's vehicle for success and profit generators *are* its vehicles. Tesla is spending too much time on trying to simultaneously develop the world around their cars when its cars have not even reached their consumers.

## **Boundary Conditions**

### *Demand*

This hypothesis is more likely to be true if there is continued demand for the current suite of Tesla vehicles, especially their most demanded Model 3. If Tesla plans to continue the Model 3 as a core product and upgrade it yearly, after bringing its production up to speed, the demand will likely continue to be strong.<sup>16</sup> This can be further be enforced if Tesla follows through on its planned expansion into European and Asian markets with the current Model 3 configurations.<sup>17</sup>

The hypothesis is less likely to be true if, as some analysis suggests, demand for the Model 3 and other current vehicles is waning.<sup>18</sup> Under these conditions it would not be as important to shift valuable resources into a production model geared specifically toward these vehicles. If prototype models are gaining in popularity and their demand is expected to be high, future investment should be focused on these new products, while filling the last orders for

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<sup>15</sup>Wolfe, Sean. "Tesla Doesn't Just Sell Cars- Here Are Some of the Company's Surprising 'Lifestyle' Products." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 1 Sept. 2018, [www.businessinsider.com/tesla-lifestyle-products-2018-8?fbclid=IwAR1xT2GfgmyFLxKYW-dzizqegX](http://www.businessinsider.com/tesla-lifestyle-products-2018-8?fbclid=IwAR1xT2GfgmyFLxKYW-dzizqegX).

<sup>16</sup>O'Kane, Sean. "Tesla's Latest Challenge Is Finding New Customers for the Model 3." *The Verge*, The Verge, 15 Feb. 2019, [www.theverge.com/2019/2/15/18213953/teslas-moder-3-new-costumers-europe-china](http://www.theverge.com/2019/2/15/18213953/teslas-moder-3-new-costumers-europe-china).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

current vehicles. This argument is further bolstered by the fact that much of the demand for Tesla Model 3 is backlogged orders, which are predicted to be delayed by at least a year.<sup>19</sup>

*Refined Hypothesis 1:* A strategy focused on fulfilling orders for in-demand electric cars will increase Tesla's performance more than their current strategy, focused on expansion of product lines and infrastructure. Specifically, the strategy should focus on improving the fulfillment of those electric vehicles that are expected to continue to be in high demand.

### *Media Buzz*

This hypothesis is more likely to be true if the the positive media attention received for innovative and new products is outweighed by the negative press attention Tesla receives for its poor fulfillment and production performance. Much of the day-to-day news and discussion around Tesla seems to focus on these problems of production and fulfillment. It could be argued that even if Tesla were to back off the newsworthy product announcements and moon-shot prototypes by focusing on production and fulfilment, the positive effects of this would outweigh the negative effects of becoming a less "buzzed-about" company.

This hypothesis is less likely to be true if Tesla's brand and identity will decrease in value if it backs off its current strategy of announcing new products. It could be asserted that much of the positive press attention and the cult following around Tesla is linked to their innovative and moon-shot approach to new products. If Tesla were to operate more traditionally and focus their

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<sup>19</sup> Rapier, Graham. "Tesla Has Shrunk Its Model S and X Production Hours in Order to Focus on the Model 3." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 23 Jan. 2019, [www.businessinsider.com/tesla-shrinks-model-s-x-production-hours-to-focus-on-model-3-2019-1](http://www.businessinsider.com/tesla-shrinks-model-s-x-production-hours-to-focus-on-model-3-2019-1).



strategy on its less newsworthy production, the “buzz” around their demand could decline to the point that it affects their performance in the long-run.<sup>20</sup>

*Refined Hypothesis 2:* A strategy focused on fulfilling orders for electric cars will increase Tesla’s performance more than their current strategy, focused on expansion of product lines and infrastructure. Specifically, generating media attention on Tesla’s renewed dependability, rather than new products, will further increase demand for their cars and grow their performance.

### *Infrastructure*

This hypothesis is more likely to be true if Tesla has a sufficient supercharging network (rapid-charging stations for Tesla vehicles) throughout the U.S.. Tesla focused on building out a network of their superchargers over the past years.<sup>21</sup> By late 2018, their network had already been adequately built out; in fact, the automaker now says that “99% of the US population is within 150 miles of a Supercharger.”<sup>22</sup> Tesla is also on their third generation of supercharger and their network far outnumbers their competitors’ network.

The hypothesis is less likely to be true if the supercharging network is still not comprehensively constructed. The number of gas stations in the US significantly outweighs the number of superchargers in the U.S.. This could indicate that its supercharging network still does not match the existing scale necessary for the gas-powered cars that we use everyday.<sup>23</sup> Tesla’s strategy has been to use the supercharging network as an incentive for consumers to buy their products because they no longer have to worry about their ability to travel long distances;

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<sup>20</sup>Kosoff, Maya. “Elon Musk Proves He’s the Greatest Showman on Earth.” *The Hive*, Vanity Fair, 7 Feb. 2018, [www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/02/elon-musk-greatest-showman-on-earth](http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2018/02/elon-musk-greatest-showman-on-earth).

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, Cadie. “Everything Tesla Wants to Accomplish by 2020.” *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 15 Nov. 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/tesla-expansion-plans-2-years-2017-11](http://www.businessinsider.com/tesla-expansion-plans-2-years-2017-11).

<sup>22</sup>Lambert, Fred. “Tesla Says 99% of the US Population Is Now within 150 Miles of a Supercharger.” *Electrek*, 10 Aug. 2018, [electrek.co/2018/08/10/tesla-supercharger-cover-99-us-population-within-150-miles/](http://electrek.co/2018/08/10/tesla-supercharger-cover-99-us-population-within-150-miles/).

<sup>23</sup>Ausick, Paul. “Why Are There 115,000 (or 150,000) Gas Stations in America?” *247wallst.Com*, 22 May 2014, [247wallst.com/economy/2014/05/22/why-are-there-115000-or-150000-gas-stations-in-america/](http://247wallst.com/economy/2014/05/22/why-are-there-115000-or-150000-gas-stations-in-america/).

however, unless this network is perceived as adequate, Tesla will not have a competitive advantage over gas-powered vehicles.

*Refined Hypothesis 3:* A strategy focused on fulfilling orders for electric cars will increase Tesla's performance more than their current strategy, focused on expansion of product lines and infrastructure. Specifically, if Tesla's supercharging network is already thoroughly built out, then Tesla should focus their resources and logistics talent to improve their delivery infrastructure.

## **Conclusion**

While considering the potential effects of these boundary conditions, if current conditions hold, we believe that Tesla should shift their strategic focus to maximizing their economic logic & strengthening their staging. Our overarching recommendation is for Tesla to center its efforts on reliably delivering Model 3s, now and in the future. Electric vehicles drive a majority of their revenues, so Tesla should allocate their resources to consistently increase their delivery volumes; this places emphasis on first staging the product with the economic logic.<sup>24</sup> The two main barriers we see that have hindered Tesla's strategy: inefficient leadership & bad decision making.

Musk is a great CEO in many rights; he's a visionary, very creative, and has an incredible engineer's mind. However, those same attributes have also to poor management. He tries to be both leader and manager; the result is far too controlling and abrasive. Thus, our next recommendation is that he should hire managers that he can trust. This will eliminate many of the problems that come along with micro-managing as a leader. Managers would fulfill Tesla's operational goals while Musk focuses on his broader goals to achieve his grander vision.

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<sup>24</sup> McKenna, Beth. "How Tesla Makes Its Money: A Slicing and Dicing of Elon Musk's Fast-Growing Empire." *The Motley Fool*, The Motley Fool, 20 July 2017, [www.fool.com/investing/2017/07/19/how-tesla-makes-its-money-a-slicing-and-dicing-of.aspx](http://www.fool.com/investing/2017/07/19/how-tesla-makes-its-money-a-slicing-and-dicing-of.aspx).

Moreover, these new managers can provide disconfirming evidence to his ideas. This would allow the company to strategically brainstorm and focus their strategy outside of Musk's opinion. By promoting a collaborative and creative environment, managers and employees will feel comfortable sharing their opinions and consistently assign role-based devil's advocates, fostering more productive task conflict. The specific outcomes Tesla could achieve through this are, first, dependable, detailed production goals with buffer time, second, higher productivity from workers who will now feel more trusted, third, increased demand from consumers who now trust the company again.

Though it may seem that a focus only on electric vehicles might forego their much broader mission statement, in reality, without this pared-down focus, Tesla may not exist in the future. In order to ultimately fulfill this mission statement, Tesla must focus on profitability and dependability in the short term. It could also be very likely that Musk is unwilling to make these necessary changes. However, with a Musk-centric culture, Tesla's problems will worsen. Delivering their most essential car, and becoming a more collaborative, cohesive organization will only beget increased demand and higher overall performance for Tesla.

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