

The Takeover

Twitter, Thursday, October 27, 2022



Antonio Gracias, Kyle Corcoran, Kate Claassen, and Musk with Pappy Van Winkle bourbon

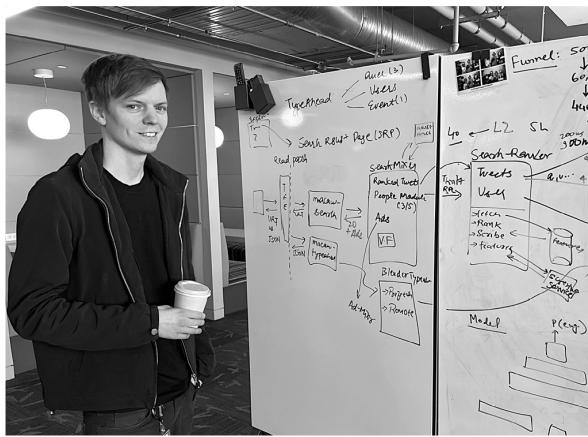


The Three Musketeers

Twitter, October 26–30, 2022



With James Musk, Dhaval Shroff and Andrew Musk judging code



Ross Nordeen studying Twitter's software architecture



James and Andrew Musk

were still in their twenties, was to form an analysis unit that would assess the code-writing skills, productivity, and even the attitudes of more than two thousand Twitter engineers and decide which of them, if any, should survive.

Code graders

James and Andrew sat with their laptops at a small round table in the open space near the second-floor conference room that Musk had commandeered as his battlefield camp. X was nearby on the floor playing with four large Rubik's cubes. (No, he could not actually solve the puzzle yet. He was only two and a half.) It was Thursday, October 27, the day Musk was rushing toward the surprise flash-close of his takeover, but he found an hour to break away from his meetings to discuss with his cousins how to cull Twitter's engineering ranks. Joining them was another young engineer from the Autopilot team, Dhaval Shroff, who had been one of the presenters on AI Day 2.

James, Andrew, and Dhaval had access on their laptops to the entire trove of code that had been written at Twitter over the past year. "Do a search to see who's done a hundred lines of code or more in the last month," Musk told them. "I want you to go through the directory and see who's committing code."

His plan was to lay off most of the engineers while retaining the really good ones. "Let's figure out who did a nontrivial amount of coding, then within that group who did the best coding," he said. It was a mammoth task, made more difficult because they did not have the code in a format that made it easy to determine who made each insertion or deletion.

James had an idea. He and Dhaval had met a young Twitter software engineer at a conference in San Francisco a few days earlier. His name was Ben. James called his number, put him on speakerphone, and started peppering him with questions.

"I have the list of everyone's insertions and deletions," Ben said.

"Can you send it?" James asked. They spent time figuring out how to use a Python script and pruning techniques to get it to transfer faster.

Then Musk broke in. "Thanks for helping, man," he said.

There was a long pause. “Elon?” Ben asked. He seemed a little awed that his incoming boss was spending time digging through the source code on the day they were rushing to close the deal.

Hearing his French accent, I realized he was the same Ben—Ben San Souci—who had asked Musk about content moderation at the coffee-bar visit. An engineer by demeanor, he wasn’t a natural networker, but he was suddenly being swept into the inner circle. It was a testament to the value of serendipity—and of showing up in person.

The following morning, with Twitter now officially in Musk’s hands, the musketeers went to the ninth floor, where the café was serving free breakfast. Ben was there and, along with a couple of other Tesla engineers, they went onto the sunny patio overlooking City Hall. There were a dozen tables surrounded by playful furnishings, but no one else from Twitter was around.

When James, Andrew, and Ross described how their layoff lists were progressing, Ben was not afraid to speak his mind. “In my experience, individuals are important, but the teams are also important,” he said. “Instead of just singling out good coders, I think it would be useful to find the teams that work really well together.”

Dhaval processed this information and agreed. “Me and James and the people on our Autopilot team are always sitting together, and the ideas flow real fast, and what we do as a team is better than what any one of us could do,” he said. Andrew noted that was why Musk favored in-person rather than remote work.

Again, Ben was willing to disagree. “I believe in coming in, and I do,” he said. “But I’m a programmer and can’t be good if I get interrupted every hour. So sometimes I don’t come in. Perhaps hybrid is best.”

In charge

In the halls of Twitter, as well as at Tesla and SpaceX and on Wall Street, there was talk about whether Musk would tap someone to help him run the company. That first day as owner, he secretly met with one possibility, Kayvon Beykpour, the cofounder of the video-streaming app Periscope, which was acquired and then killed by Twitter. Beykpour had become

president of product development at Twitter but was fired by Agrawal earlier in 2022 without explanation.

Their conversation in Musk's conference room, which also included tech-investor Scott Belsky, showed a real mind-meld. "I have an idea on the ads," Beykpour suggested. "Ask people who subscribe what their interests are and offer to personalize their experience. You could make it a benefit of subscribing."

"Yeah, and advertisers would love that," Musk said.

"Also a down-vote button for tweets," Beykpour said. "You need some negative user signal that can feed into rankings."

"Only paid and verified users should be allowed to do a down-vote," Musk said, "because otherwise you could be subject to a bot attack."

At the end of the conversation, Musk made Beykpour a casual offer. "Why don't you come back to work here?" he asked. "It seems like you love it." He then laid out his whole vision of making Twitter a financial and content platform, with all the elements he had envisioned for X.com.

"Well, I'm conflicted," Beykpour responded. "I look up to you. I've purchased every product you ever created. Let me get back to you."

It was clear, however, that Musk was not going to cede much control, just as he hadn't at his other companies. A month later, I asked Beykpour what he concluded. "I just don't see a role for me," he said. "Elon is passionate about directly driving engineering and product himself."

Musk was in no hurry to bring in anyone else to run Twitter right away, even after he conducted an online poll that said he should. He even dispensed with having a chief financial officer. He wanted it to be his playground. At SpaceX he had at least fifteen direct reports, and at Tesla there were about twenty. At Twitter, he told his team, he was willing to have more than twenty. And he decreed that they and the most dedicated engineers should all work in a huge open workspace on the tenth floor, where he would deal with them directly each day and night.

Round one

Musk had tasked his young musketeers to develop a strategy for making deep cuts in the bloated engineering ranks, and they had been scouring the code

base to assess who was excellent and all in. At 6 p.m. on Friday, October 28, twenty-four hours after the closing, Musk gathered them and three dozen other trusted mercenaries from Tesla and SpaceX to begin implementing the plan.

“Twitter now has twenty-five hundred software engineers,” Musk told them. “If each wrote only three lines of code per day, a ridiculously low bar, that should make three million lines a year, which is enough for a whole operating system. This is not happening. Something is deeply amiss. I feel like I’m in a comedy show here.”

“Product managers who don’t know anything about coding keep ordering up features they don’t know how to create,” James said. “Like cavalry generals who don’t know how to ride a horse.” It was a line Musk himself often used.

“I’m going to set a rule,” Musk decreed. “We have one hundred fifty engineers doing Autopilot. I want to get down to that number at Twitter.”

Even granting Musk’s view of the low productivity at Twitter, a layoff of more than 90 percent of the engineers made most at the table flinch. Milan Kovac, now less intimidated by Musk than he was in the early Optimus days, explained why more were necessary. Alex Spiro, the lawyer, also urged caution. He felt that some jobs at Twitter did not require genius computer skills. “I don’t understand why every single person that works at a social media company has to have one-sixty IQ and work twenty hours a day,” he argued. Some people need to be good at selling, others need the emotional skills of good managers, and some are merely uploading user videos and don’t have to be superstars. Plus, cutting to the bone risked having the system fail if anyone got sick or fed up.

Musk did not agree. He wanted deep cuts not only for financial reasons but also because he wanted a hardcore, fanatic work culture. He was willing, indeed eager to take risks and fly without a net.

James, Andrew, Ross, and Dhaval began meeting with Twitter’s managers and asking them to meet Musk’s targets of getting rid of up to 90 percent of their employees. “They were pretty unhappy,” Dhaval says. “They argued that the company would just crash.” He and the other musketeers had a standard response: “Elon has asked for this, and this is how he operates, so we have to come up with a plan.”

Blue Checks

Twitter, November 2–10, 2022



A presentation in the conference room



James Musk, Dhaval Shroff, and Andrew Musk assessing engineers

Thermonuclear

Yoel Roth and most of the content moderation team had survived round one of the layoffs and firings. Given the battle against racist trolling and the revolt among advertisers, it seemed prudent not to decimate that team right away. “I cut a very small number of roles that I thought were nonessential, but nobody pressured me to fire people,” Roth says. That day he tweeted a reassurance to advertisers that the company’s “core moderation capabilities remain in place.”

He finished crafting the new misgendering policy he had promised Musk. The plan was to put a warning on any offending tweet, lower its visibility, and not let it be retweeted. Musk approved.

Musk then suggested an additional idea for content moderation. Twitter had a little-known feature called “Bird Watch.” It allowed users to put corrections or contextual statements on tweets they found false. Musk loved the idea but hated the name. “From now on we’re calling it Community Notes,” he said. It appealed to him as a way to avoid censoring things and instead, as he put it, “let collective humanity start a conversation and negotiate whether it was true or false.”

Advertisers had been pulling away for a week, but by Friday, November 4, the exodus was flowing faster. Part of the reason was a boycott led by online activists who were urging companies, such as Oreo cookies, to remove their ads. Musk threatened to go after advertisers who succumbed to pressure. “A thermonuclear name & shame is exactly what will happen if this continues,” he tweeted.

That evening, Musk went into demon mode. Most people at Twitter, including Roth, had seen him be arbitrary and insensitive at times, but they had not been exposed to the cold fury of his trance-like darkest persona nor learned how to ride out the storm. He called Roth and ordered him to stop users from urging advertisers to boycott Twitter. This did not, of course, align with his professed fealty to free speech, but Musk’s anger takes on a moral righteousness that can brush away inconsistencies. “Twitter is a good thing,” he told Roth. “It is morally right for it to exist. These people are doing something immoral.” The users who were pressuring advertisers to boycott Twitter were engaged in blackmail, he said, and should be banned.

Roth was appalled. There was no rule on Twitter against advocating boycotts. It was done all the time. Indeed, it was the type of advocacy, Roth felt, that made Twitter important. Plus, there was the Barbra Streisand effect, named after the singer sued a photographer for posting a photo of her home, thus causing the photo to get a thousand times more attention. Banning tweets that called for an advertising boycott would increase awareness of the boycott. “I think tonight is the night I’m going to have to quit,” Roth told his husband.

After exchanging a few text messages, Musk called Roth on the phone. “It’s unfair,” he said. “It’s blackmail.”

“These tweets are not a violation of our rules,” Roth replied. “If you remove them, it’s going to backfire.” The conversation lasted for fifteen minutes and did not go well. After Roth made his case, Musk started talking quickly, and it was clear he wanted no pushback. He didn’t raise his voice, which made his anger feel even more menacing. Musk’s authoritarian side unnerved Roth.

“I’m changing Twitter policy right now,” he declared. “Blackmail is prohibited as of right now. Ban it. Ban them.”

“Let me see what I can find out,” Roth said. He was trying to buy time. “I was like, I need to get the fuck off the phone,” Roth recalls.

Roth called Robin Wheeler, who had quit as Twitter’s head of advertising sales but been lured back by Musk and Jared Birchall. “You know how this shit works,” Roth told her. “If we ban an activist campaign, that is a great way to make it take off even more.”

Wheeler agreed. “Don’t do anything,” she told Roth. “I’ll text Elon too and then he’ll hear it from multiple people.”

The next thing that Roth heard from Musk was a question about a totally different subject: What was happening with the elections in Brazil? “He and I suddenly went back to having normal interactions, where he’s asking questions and I’m giving him answers,” Roth says. Musk had moved on from demon mode. His mind had switched to other things, and he never mentioned the advertising boycott again or followed up on his orders.

Henry Kissinger once quoted an aide saying that the Watergate scandal had happened “because some damn fool went into the Oval Office and did what Nixon told him to do.” Those around Musk knew how to ride out his

All In

Twitter, November 10–18, 2022



Christopher Stanley, far right, taking a selfie with Musk and engineers after a hackathon



Ross Nordeen and James Musk

Moving in

The Twitter Blue rollout, which Musk thought would be the elixir to save the company, was now on hold, and the collapse of ad sales showed no signs of abating. New rounds of layoffs that would cut staff again were being planned. Those who remained would have to be as maniacally driven as the engineers at Tesla and SpaceX. “I’m a big believer that a small number of exceptional people who are highly motivated can do better than a large number of people who are pretty good and moderately motivated,” he told me at the end of that painful second week at Twitter.

If he wanted the survivors at Twitter to be hardcore, he was going to have to show them how hardcore he could be. He had slept on the floor of his first office at Zip2 in 1995. He had slept on the roof of Tesla’s Nevada battery factory in 2017. He had slept under his desk at the Fremont assembly plant in 2018. It wasn’t because it was truly necessary. He did it because it was in his nature to love the drama, the urgency, and the sense that he was a wartime general who could rally his troops into battle mode. Now it was time for him to sleep at Twitter headquarters.

When he arrived back from a weekend trip to Austin late on the night of Sunday, November 13, he went straight to the Twitter office and commandeered a couch in a seventh-floor library. Steve Davis, his fix-it chief, had come to Twitter to oversee cost-cutting. Along with his wife Nicole Hollander and two-month-old baby, Davis moved into a conference room nearby. Twitter’s cushy headquarters had showers, a kitchen, and a game room. They joked that it was all quite luxurious.

The second round

As he was flying into San Francisco that Sunday night, Musk called his cousin James and told him that he and his brother Andrew needed to report to duty and meet him at Twitter when he arrived. It was Andrew’s birthday, and they were out to dinner with friends. But they both came in. “People at the company were shit-posting things about Elon, and he said he needed a few of us there he could trust,” James says.

Ross Nordeen, the third musketeer, was already there. He had been in the office all weekend, reviewing the code of Twitter engineers to see who was good and bad. After subsisting mainly on crackers for two weeks, his skinny frame now looked skeletal. That Sunday, he fell asleep in the company's fifth-floor game room. When he woke up Monday morning and heard that Musk was intent on making more deep cuts, his stomach churned. "I just felt like shit that we were going to fire another eighty percent of the company." He went to the bathroom and vomited. "I just woke up and puked," he says. "I had never done that before."

He walked to his apartment to shower and think things over. "I went out and felt I didn't want to be here now," he says. But by noon he decided he would not abandon the team, so he returned. "I didn't want to let down James."

The musketeers, joined by Dhaval Shroff and other young loyalists, set up a war room, known as "the hot box," in a stifling tenth-floor windowless room near the big conference room that Musk was now using. They could feel the resentment from many of the Twitter employees, who had dubbed them "the goon squad." But a handful of dedicated Twitter engineers, such as Ben San Souci, wanted to be part of the new order of battle, and they joined the musketeer team in the floor's open workspace.

Musk met with the musketeers early that afternoon. "We got a shit-show here," he told them. "I'd be surprised if there were three hundred excellent engineers in this company." They needed to cut down to that muscle, which meant firing close to another 80 percent.

There was some pushback. The World Cup was coming up, along with Thanksgiving and its big shopping days. "We can't afford to go down then," Yoni Ramon said. James agreed. "I got the sense this could be bad," he says. Musk got angry. He was adamant that deep cuts were still needed.

The engineers who stayed, he said, had to meet three criteria. They had to be excellent, trustworthy, and driven. The first round of cuts, made the week before, had been designed to weed out those who were not excellent. They agreed that the next priority would be identifying and firing those who were not trustworthy, or more specifically, those who did not seem to be completely loyal to Musk.

The team began going over the Slack messages and social media postings of Twitter employees, focusing on those who had high levels of access to the software stack. “He told us to find the people who might be disgruntled or a threat,” Dhaval says. They searched for keywords, including “Elon,” on the public Slack channel. Musk hung out with them in the hot box, joking about the things they were seeing.

There were occasional moments of amusement. They stumbled across the list of words that were automatically prevented from being trending topics on Twitter. When they got to the word “turdburger,” Musk started laughing so hard that he fell to the floor wheezing. But some of the messages they found, including threats of revenge, inflamed his paranoia. “One guy literally wrote a command that could take down a whole data center and said, ‘I wonder what happens if you run this,’” James says. “He posted it.” They immediately cut off his access and fired him.

The messages they read were mainly those in the public portions of Slack, but that still discomfited Ross, who was recovering from his morning nausea. “It seems like we were violating privacy and free speech and all that stuff,” he said later. “They had a culture of shitting on their bosses.” Andrew, who like James was very sensitive to the privacy concerns, said they did not look at private messages. “It’s striking a balance in a company,” he says. “To what extent do you allow dissent?”

Musk did not share these qualms. Unfettered free speech did not extend to the workplace. He told them to root out people who were making very snarky comments. He wanted to rid the workforce of negativity. The team worked past midnight and delivered a list of three dozen malcontents. “Do you want to speak to this person and show them what they’ve said?” James asked. Musk said no. They should be fired. And they were.

Yes or no?

The next trait Musk wanted to filter for—after excellence and trustworthiness—was drive. For his entire life, he had been hardcore and all in. It was a badge of honor to him. He scorned successful people who liked to take vacations.

James and Ross spent Tuesday thinking of ways to determine which employees were truly driven. Then they saw a post someone had made on

Slack. “Please let me go with severance and I will leave,” it said. It dawned on them that they could rely on self-selection. Some people might be happy to work late nights and weekends. But others, understandably, didn’t relish that prospect and were not embarrassed to say so.

James and Ross realized that people were willing, indeed proud to declare what camp they were in. So they suggested to Musk that he give employees the chance to opt out of the new hardcore Twitter. He liked the idea, and Ross engineered a simple form with a button that employees could click to say they wanted to leave on good terms and get three months’ severance. “We were so excited,” James said. “We won’t have to do all this additional firing.”

A couple of hours later, Musk emerged from a meeting and came into the hot box smiling. “I have a great idea,” he said. “We’re flipping it. Don’t make the choice opt-out. Instead, make it opt-in. We want to make it sound like the Shackleton expedition. We want people who declare they are hardcore.”

Musk flew to Delaware late that night to testify in a shareholder lawsuit that challenged his Tesla compensation package. Shortly before 4 a.m. Eastern Time, he tested the opt-in link from the airplane, becoming the first person to say yes to the new Twitter expectations. Then he sent an email to all employees:

From: Elon Musk
Subj: A Fork in the Road
Date: Nov. 16, 2022

Going forward, to build a breakthrough Twitter 2.0 and succeed in an increasingly competitive world, we will need to be extremely hardcore. This will mean working long hours at high intensity....

If you are sure that you want to be part of the new Twitter, please click yes on the link below. Anyone who has not done so by 5pm ET tomorrow (Thursday) will receive three months of severance.

James and Ross stayed up all night watching the results come in. They put down bets. How many would say yes? James thought it would be 2,000 out of the approximately 3,600 remaining employees. Ross wagered it would be

2,150. Musk chimed in with a low prediction: 1,800 would choose to stay. In the end, 2,492 said yes, a surprisingly high 69 percent of the workforce. Musk's assistant Jehn Balajadia handed out vodka-spiked Red Bulls to celebrate.

Code reviews

That Thursday night, a somewhat alarming message went out to Twitter employees. The following day—Friday, November 18—Twitter's offices would be closed and badge access would be suspended until Monday. The edict came about because of security concerns that the people who had just been fired or had chosen to leave might try to sabotage things. But Musk ignored the email. After working until 1 a.m. Friday morning, he sent out a contradictory message: “Anyone who actually writes software, please report to the 10th floor at 2pm today.” A little later he added, “Please be prepared to do brief code reviews as I’m walking around the office.”

It was confusing. One engineer based in Boston was the only person left on the team in charge of caching important data. He was afraid that if he boarded a plane, the system might go down while he was flying across the country and he'd be unable to fix it. He was also afraid that if he didn't come in, he would be fired. He flew to San Francisco.

By 2 p.m., almost three hundred engineers had made it to the office, some carrying their suitcases, despite not knowing if their travel was going to be reimbursed. But Musk stayed in meetings all afternoon, ignoring them. There was no food, and by 6 p.m., the engineers were not only irritated but hungry, so Andrew and security engineering director Christopher Stanley went out and got boxes of pizzas. “The mood had gotten edgy by then, and I think Elon was keeping them waiting on purpose,” says Andrew. “The pizza calmed things.”

When Musk finally emerged at 8 p.m., he began what he called “desk-siding,” standing next to the workstations of the young engineers and going over their code. His suggestions, they later said, were sometimes good and at other times shallow. They often involved ways to simplify a process. He also stood with them at whiteboards, where they drew the architecture of the Twitter system. Musk peppered the clusters of engineers with questions. Why

does search suck? Why are the ads so irrelevant to user interests? It was well after 1 a.m. when he scooped up X and left.

Hardcore

Twitter, November 18–30, 2022



James Musk and Ben San Souci

despite the sudden departure of hundreds of engineers and the strain caused by World Cup videos. The last thing they wanted was another wrench thrown into the system. That is when Musk emerged from a meeting in his glass-walled conference room with Robin Wheeler, who had been hanging on as Twitter's ad sales chief, and showed James and Ross his iPhone. "Look what I just tweeted," he said with a mischievous grin.

It was a poll question: "Reinstate former President Trump? Yes. No." Leaving aside the propriety of lifting the ban on Trump and of letting a free-for-all online poll make the decision, there was the engineering issue. Conducting a poll, where millions of votes would have to be tabulated instantly and populated in real time on user feeds, could push Twitter's undermanned servers into a meltdown. But Musk relished risk. He wanted to see how fast a car could drive, what happened when you floored it, how close to the sun you could fly. James and Ross were "shitting bricks," they said, but Musk seemed gleeful.

When the poll closed the next day, more than 15 million users had voted. The tally was close: 51.8 percent to 48.2 percent in favor of reinstating Trump. "The people have spoken," Musk declared. "Trump will be reinstated. Vox Populi, Vox Dei."

I asked him right afterward whether he had a sense in advance of how the poll would turn out. No, he said. And if it had gone the other way, would he have kept Trump banned? Yes. "I'm not Trump's fan. He's disruptive. He's the world's champion of bullshit."

Round three

In her meeting with Musk that Friday afternoon, ad sales chief Robin Wheeler told him she was resigning. She had tried to do so a week earlier, at the same time as Yoel Roth, but Musk and Jared Birchall had persuaded her to stay.

Most people, including Ross and James, assumed her resignation was in reaction to Musk's decision to make unilateral reinstatements and launch a poll about unbanning Trump. But what actually bothered Wheeler more was that Musk was hell-bent on another round of firings, and he demanded that she make a list of who she would let go. Earlier that week, she had stood in

front of her sales organization and told them why they should opt in with the “yes” button to be part of the new, demanding Twitter. Now she would have to look some of those same people in the eye, the ones who had said yes, and tell them they were fired.

Musk’s firing and layoff targets kept changing, depending on his mood. At one point he told the musketeers that he wanted to bring the software-writing team down to fifty. At other times that week, he said they should not worry about absolute numbers. “Just make a list of who the really good engineers are and weed out the rest,” he told them.

To facilitate the process, Musk ordered all of Twitter’s software engineers to send him samples of code they had recently written. Over the weekend, Ross worked to get the replies transferred from Musk’s mailbox to his own so that he and James and Dhaval could assess the work. “I have five hundred email submissions in my inbox,” he said wearily on Sunday night. “We’ve somehow got to go through them all tonight to see what engineers should stay.”

Why was Musk doing this? “He believes that a small group of really great generalist engineers can outperform a regular group a hundred times larger,” Ross said. “Like a small battalion of marines that is really tight can do amazing things. And I think he wants to rip the Band-Aid off. He doesn’t want to drag this out.”

Ross, James, and Andrew met with Musk on Monday morning and presented the criteria they had used to assess the submissions. Musk approved the plan and then headed down the stairs with Alex Spiro to the café, where he had hastily called another all-hands employee meeting. As they walked, he asked what he should say if he was questioned about possible additional layoffs. Spiro suggested he deflect the topic, but Musk decided he wanted to say there would be “no more layoffs.” His rationale was that the impending round of exits would be firing people “for cause” because their work was allegedly not good enough, rather than reduction-in-force layoffs, for which people would be due a generous severance. He was making a distinction that most people missed. “There are no more RIFs planned,” he declared at the outset of the meeting, to great applause.

Afterward, he met with a dozen young coders who had been chosen by Ross and James for their excellence. It relaxed him to be talking about

engineering, and he drilled down with them on issues such as ways to make video uploads easier. In the future, he told them, the teams at Twitter would be led by engineers like themselves rather than designers and product managers. It was a subtle shift. It reflected his belief that Twitter should be, at its core, a software engineering company, led by people with a feel for coding, rather than a media and consumer-product company, led by people with a feel for human relationships and desires.

Why so demanding?

The final round of firing notices went out the day before Thanksgiving. “Hi, As a result of the recent code review exercise, it has been determined that your code is not satisfactory, and we regret to inform you that your employment with Twitter will be terminated effective immediately.” Fifty engineers were let go, their passwords and access immediately cut off.

The three rounds of layoffs and firings were so scattershot that it was initially hard to tally up the toll. When the dust settled, about 75 percent of the Twitter workforce had been cut. There were just under eight thousand employees when Musk took over on October 27. By mid-December, there were just over two thousand.

Musk had wrought one of the greatest shifts in corporate culture ever. Twitter had gone from being among the most nurturing workplaces, replete with free artisanal meals and yoga studios and paid rest days and concern for “psychological safety,” to the other extreme. He did it not only for cost reasons. He preferred a scrappy, hard-driven environment where rabid warriors felt psychological danger rather than comfort.

Sometimes that meant he broke things, and it looked like it was possible he would do so with Twitter. A hashtag #twitterdeathwatch began trending. Tech and media pundits wrote their farewells to the service, assuming it would disappear any hour. Even Musk laughingly admitted that he thought it might collapse. He showed me a gif of a flaming dumpster rolling down a road and admitted, “Some days I wake up and look at Twitter to see if it’s still working.” But every morning when he checked, it was running. It made it through record traffic during the World Cup. More than that, with its kernel

of driven engineers, it began to innovate and add features faster than it ever had before.

Zoë Schiffer, Casey Newton, and Alex Heath at *The Verge* and *New York Magazine* had produced some well-reported, hair-raising insider stories about the turmoil at Twitter. They showed how Musk had broken “the company culture that built Twitter into one of the world’s most influential social networks.” But they also noted that the dire predictions many of their colleagues had made did not come to pass. “In some ways, Musk was vindicated,” they wrote. “Twitter was less stable now, but the platform survived and mostly functioned even with the majority of employees gone. He had promised to right-size a bloated company, and now it operated on minimal head count.”

It was not always a pretty sight. Musk’s method, as it had been since the Falcon 1 rocket, was to iterate fast, take risks, be brutal, accept some flameouts, then try again. “We were changing the engines while the plane was spiraling out of control,” he says of Twitter. “It’s a miracle we survived.”

Apple visit

“Apple has mostly stopped advertising on Twitter,” Musk tweeted at the end of November. “Do they hate free speech in America?”

That evening, Musk had one of his regular long phone conversations with his mentor and investor Larry Ellison, who was then living mainly on Lanai, the island he owned in Hawaii. Ellison, who had been a mentor of Steve Jobs, gave Musk a piece of advice: he should not get into a fight with Apple. It was the one company that Twitter could not afford to alienate. Apple was a major advertiser. More importantly, Twitter could not survive unless it continued to be available in the iPhone’s App Store.

In some ways, Musk was like Steve Jobs, a brilliant but abrasive taskmaster with a reality-distortion field who could drive his employees crazy but also drive them to do things they thought were impossible. He could be confrontational, with both colleagues and competitors. Tim Cook, who took over Apple in 2011, was different. He was calm, coolly disciplined, and disarmingly polite. Although he could be steely when warranted, he avoided