Elon Musk

Regarded as one of the most influential people of the 21st century, the eccentric billionaire Elon Reeve Musk is truly an inspiring success story of the modern age. The self made man is founder of some of the most valuable tech companies in the world, and is often celebrated as the Ironman of real life due to his incredible understanding and innovation of technology. However, it seems that his path to success was not an easy one. Born in South Africa in 1971, Musk describes his own childhood as “nonstop horrible”. His father was emotionally abusive, and extraordinarily tough on his children; a memorable moment was when he forced Musk and his brother to sit for hours on end while he lectured them. As a bookish and unsociable boy, the young Musk was also mercilessly bullied by gangs of classmates who often used physical violence; one instance of beating even resulted in him being sent to the hospital. Musk describes this horrific experience:

“They got my best [expletive] friend to lure me out of hiding so they could beat me up. And that [expletive] hurt. For some reason they decided that I was it, and they were going to go after me nonstop. That’s what made growing up difficult. For a number of years there was no respite. You get chased around by gangs at school who tried to beat the [expletive] out of me, and then I’d come home, and it would just be awful there as well.”

Nonetheless, Musk did not let these episodes overcome him. At the age of nine, when he received his first computer (a Commodore VIC-20), he immediately became interested in programming and began to teach himself. By age 12, he had accomplished his first great success, a game that he programmed himself called “Blastar” (similar to Space Invaders). He sold the game for a cool $500 and gained significant media attention as well. When Musk was 17 years old, his difficult experience both at home and at school would lead him to make the life-changing decision of moving to Canada.

In 1989, Elon Musk moved to Kingston, Ontario without the support of his parents, and started attending Queen’s University. He worked several low-paying jobs and was on the brink of poverty. Musk’s real dream was, however, to live and study in the United States, so in 1992, he transferred to the University of Pennsylvania where he eventually received Bachelor of Science degrees in physics and economics. During this time, when Musk began to suffer from adolescent depression, he started to vigorously study religious and philosophical literature. He amazingly learned one of his most important lessons - that success comes only if you think of the right questions - in Douglas Adam’s novel “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy”, in which a supercomputer, after million years of thinking on the meaning of life, responded with the meaningless number 42. Thus, when he asked himself what would influence humanity most in the coming years, he concluded with: the internet, the transition to renewable energy sources, and space colonization.

In 1995, Musk moved to Stanford University for a PhD in applied physics and materials science, however, after only two days of attendance, he left the program to start his first IT company along with his brother, Kimbal Musk. The brothers started the internet service Zip2 with $28 000 of their parent’s money, at a time when the internet was experiencing an exciting period of accelerated advance and development. Yet, it was Zip2 which achieved the first considerable measure of success and fortune, as it was sold for almost $350 million after four years. Zip2 had created online city guides which provided local businesses with an internet presence, by linking them with internet searches and also providing directions. Immediately after this sale, Musk began work on his next project, x.com, which was an online payment tool that eventually evolved into PayPal. This company was acquired by eBay for $1.5 billion in 2001. Musk’s success in the early days of the internet truly inspired its development to its greatness today.

The sale of PayPal marked the end of Musk’s investment in the internet; he began to pursue his next dream: the colonization of space. In 2001, he conceptualized the idea of “Mars Oasis”, a project to experiment with greenhouses in space, in an attempt to regain the public’s interest in space exploration. Musk had the plan to purchase refurbished ICBM’s from Russia to launch his proposed projects into space. However, this idea was ultimately canceled as the missiles were overpriced, and Russian executives had insulted him based on his “lack of experience”. Despite this, Musk used his ingenuity and innovativeness to immediately think of a new direction - to manufacture his own rockets. He calculated that he could produce rockets at a tenth of a cost of an ICBM, and thus he started his next company, Space Exploration Technologies, or SpaceX. This company has since developed several successful rocket systems, and works regularly with official agencies such as NASA and DARPA to launch materials into space, and to conduct scientific experiments. In fact, SpaceX has a $1.6 billion contract with NASA to resupply the International Space Station, and remains the first and only commercial company to launch and connect a spacecraft with the ISS. Recently, the company has successfully launched, and then landed a rocket, thus making it reusable which significantly reduces the cost of launch. This achievement is an unbelievably difficult one, as a landing rocket must be able to accelerate in three ways: vertically, in order to propel the rocket upwards and also to slow the descent; horizontally, in order to aim for a specific landing site; and angularly, in order to adjust the rotational motion so it can land without tipping over. . Traditionally, landing craft (such as the moon lander) have had many thrusters pointed in many directions so it could better control the landing, as well as having a wider base so the center of gravity is lower. These features cannot be incorporated in the SpaceX rocket as it is designed to also blast off from Earth; the only thruster is on the bottom, and the rocket must be tall and slender so it could reduce effects of wind resistance. Since the single thruster must be able to control the high centre of gravity rocket through all three methods, the calculated physics behind the landing of the SpaceX rocket is complex and requires the precise and intricate programming of computers.This accomplishment is one of many that SpaceX have achieved; they have greatly inspired and pushed private sector development into space travel, and also has rebooted the public’s interest of space.

Almost at the same time as his projects with SpaceX, Elon Musk also invested in his third goal of renewable energy sources. He became the chairman of Tesla Motors after personally contributing over $70 million into the startup in 2004. Musk directly designed many of the features in a Tesla vehicle, including the composite material of the hull, the advanced battery systems, and the headlights. However, as the first Tesla car was about to enter production in 2007, problems began to arise. Management issues forced the selling price to be double of what was originally planned, the transmission was laden with issues, and the release of the car had to be postponed for more than a year. During these challenging times, Musk proved to be an effective leader. Not only did he put in all of his effort - often working a hundred hours each week, but he managed the company with an iron fist. He let go many staff members including top executives, demanded lower costs from suppliers, and closed company offices. To save the company from bankruptcy, he poured all his money into Tesla - even selling his favourite McLaren F1 sports car. Because of his hard work, devotion, and risk-taking, the company once again was successful, receiving contracts from Daimler and benefits from the US Department of Energy. Now, Tesla cars use advanced technologies such as auto-driving, smart breaking, and bioweapon defense, and are regarded as the epitome of safety, luxury, and sustainability.

The story of Elon Musk is one of amazement, which is sure to inspire many more to achieve greatness. His hard working ethic, perseverance, and his uncanny ability to bring fantasy into real life has made him one of the most influential people in the modern age. His investments into the internet, space exploration, and renewable energy systems undoubtedly accelerated the advancement of mankind’s technology and curiosity.

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