THE PARTICULAR MENTAL ILLNESS AND MAD POWER OF ELON MUSK AND HIS SECRET PARTNERS AT GOLDMAN SACHS

The Tesla leaks: what it’s really like to work for Elon Musk

Oliver Moody reports on the whistleblowers who lifted the lid on the ‘cultlike hell’ of the electric car giant’s gigafactories — and the safety record it tried to keep secret

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER CROWTHER Oliver Moody

The Sunday Times

As the head of investigations at Germany's leading business newspaper, Sönke Iwersen is well accustomed to dealing with red-herring tips provided by cranks, hostile investors and petty grudge-bearers. But his rule is: "Never turn anyone away. Always listen." It might just lead to something big.

This principle was thoroughly vindicated on November 4, 2022. An anonymous figure contacted Handelsblatt, Iwersen's publication, offering to blow the whistle on what they said were serious problems inside Tesla, the world's most valuable carmaker. Within minutes of striking up contact through an encrypted app called Threema, the source had sent Iwersen a Microsoft Excel file that purported to contain the personal details of 5,000 people the company had laid off.

Seconds later came another database listing the names, email addresses, birth dates and social security numbers of 73,000 Tesla employees. Another had their salaries. It was everything a malicious actor would need to steal their identities, readily available to the most junior employee at the firm. A third item was simply titled: "Worst things we are doing to our customers."

And so began the Tesla files, a trove of more than 23,000 documents from a trillion-dollar company that had previously drawn a Trappist veil of silence over its internal workings, which has now been retold in a book of the same name by Iwersen and his colleague Michael Verfürden, a reporter in his investigations unit.

The investigative journalists Michael Verfürden, left, and Sönke Iwersen

ALEXANDER VOSS

This was no ordinary corporate leak. It was a skeleton key to a shadowy world run like a personal fiefdom by the world's wealthiest person, Elon Musk. "It was by far the most important leak we've ever had at Handelsblatt," Iwersen says from his office in Düsseldorf. Over the two and a half years he and his team have spent dissecting the files, Musk has forged a political alliance with Donald Trump and helped to propel him to the presidency with $288 million (£220 million) in donations and copious support through X, his social media platform. He was then put in charge of the Department of Government Efficiency, pledged to chop $2 trillion out of the federal budget and appeared in the Oval Office so frequently that he was nicknamed the president's "first buddy". That bromance is now over, but Iwersen and Verfürden recall looking on in "disbelief" as it played out. "However far we look back," they write, "we find no precedent for what's unfolding. Rockefeller, Ford, Morgan, Walton, the Koch brothers — all shaped politics in their time. But none of them ever installed a president. And then governed alongside him."

For the German journalists, if you want to understand Musk you have to understand Tesla. The two are so intertwined that it is easy to forget he did not create the company. It was founded in 2003 by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning, a pair of American engineers based in Menlo Park, California. Musk barged in during its first funding round the following year, becoming chairman in return for investing $6.4 million.

Originally the aim was to build a premium sports car, the Roadster, using the proceeds to take electric vehicles into the mainstream. After Musk launched a boardroom coup and became chief executive in 2008, though, its ambitions went stratospheric. Ultimately, Musk said, he wanted to flood the world's streets and motorways with 20 million fully self-driving electric "robotaxis" that could be summoned at the tap of a phone screen, all but eliminating road accidents.

Not everyone shared this vision. In 2010 Tesla was saved from bankruptcy only by a generously termed $465 million loan from the US Department of Energy. In 2018 it survived the heaviest short-selling attack in recent history, as investors bet against the company's stock price amid concerns over unattainable production targets. But today there are at least three million Teslas on the roads and the business is worth more than Ferrari, Mercedes-Benz, Volkswagen, BMW, Porsche, Ford and General Motors put together. Musk's $127 billion of stock is loosely equivalent to the annual economic output of Ecuador or Kenya.

Yet the outside world knows remarkably little about what goes on at Tesla's six "gigafactories" — its plants in Nevada, New York, Brandenburg, Shanghai, Texas and Fremont, California. The firm employs more than 100,000 people, from developers and engineers to assembly line workers, but even former staff with an axe to grind have tended to be discreet. Circumspection is so ingrained that Tesla requires job applicants to sign a non-disclosure agreement before they are invited to their first interview.

The whistleblower

Handelsblatt's source, Lukasz Krupski, was one of many thousands who unreservedly bought into the Tesla hype. A gifted autodidact and self-avowed "Musk disciple", the Warsaw-born Krupski had been thrilled to get a job as a technician at Tesla's Drammen showroom in Norway, its biggest market in per capita terms, in 2018.

Musk, right, opens Tesla's 'gigafactory' in Brandenburg with the German chancellor Olaf Scholz, centre, in March 2022

ALAMY

Things went well at first. Krupski earned Musk's personal thanks for "saving" a car show by having the presence of mind to remove a burning power booster capsule from one of the vehicles moments before the curtain was lifted. But then he made the mistake of taking the company's professed culture of openness too literally. After he raised a catalogue of concerns with his managers — ranging from defects in Tesla's products to basic safety in the workplace and colleagues making sexist jokes — Krupski discovered that his superiors had installed spyware on his laptop.

He also realised that he could retrieve dizzying volumes of sensitive files from the firm's systems because no one had bothered to restrict the access permissions. By the time he was fired he had siphoned off more than 100 gigabytes of data.

• **Inside Elon Musk's first Tesla gigafactory in Germany**

Iwersen and his team initially struggled to believe the leak was real. It seemed more plausible that such a large cache of spreadsheets, videos and slideshows, many marked “secret” or “confidential”, had been deepfaked than that one of the most valuable corporations on the planet had left them lying around for anyone to read.

The deeper they delved, however, the more they found not only that every detail checked out, but also that the nuggets of personal information could be used to contact and make whistleblowers out of dozens of new sources at the company.

Iwersen, 54, founded Handelsblatt’s investigations unit in 2012 and has won more national prizes than you can fit on a mantelpiece. Serious and measured, he has spent two thirds of his adult life forensically uncovering corporate wrongdoing. But the first months that he and Verfürden, 33, spent sifting through the Tesla files were on a different level. First thing in the morning, new documents would ping on to Iwersen’s phone while he was slicing apples for his three children or checking their faces for stray splotches of toothpaste. At weekends he would switch his attention between his sons’ football matches and handling the almost ceaseless flow of correspondence with Krupski and the Handelsblatt reporters. At one point a batch of files arrived while Verfürden and his family were unwrapping their Christmas presents.

President Trump admires a Tesla Model S with Musk at the White House in March. The president bought one in the same colour

AFP

Musk: hero or indulged emperor?

The Tesla Files is inevitably, to some degree, a book about Musk himself. There is a heroic version of his story — the tale of the unsleeping genius who stalks the assembly lines in the small hours, personally reprogramming robot arms to speed them up, who once erected an entire vehicle production line in a car park within a week, using a slope to compensate for the lack of oomph in the conveyor belt. The Musk who invented the reusable rocket, treated himself for depression with horse tranquillisers and put a chip in a quadriplegic person’s brain so they could control a computer mouse with their thoughts. The Musk whose core design principle is borrowed from his 19-year-old autistic son Saxon: “Why doesn’t the future look like the future?”

The Tesla Files paints a different picture — one of a figure who resembles a Roman emperor flattered to the point of delusion by a court of flunkies. Nicknamed N1 (Number One) or Voyager (after the lonely space probe) by his minions, Musk is assiduously indulged in his whimsies but cushioned from unpleasant truths. Invoices unearthed by the investigation suggest he is accompanied round the clock by bodyguards and minders who serve as his interface with the world: “They handle his travel, pay his hotel bills, shop for him, bring him medicine.”

In 2015 Musk complained that the autopilot on his Tesla continually struggled with one section of his commute to the headquarters of SpaceX. The engineers concluded its cameras could not recognise a faded white line in the road. Rather than tell him so, they hired a line-painting machine and planned to shut down the road in the dead of night and redraw it themselves, until they found a sympathetic official in the local transport department who did it for them in return for a tour of SpaceX.

Yet the real core of *The Tesla Files* is a triad of disclosures that might have destroyed a more conventional company.

Sloppy data security

The first was that the files existed at all and could be downloaded by any member of staff who cared to look for them.

“How is it possible that a company like this and a guy [Musk] who pitches himself as a super-tech pioneer who knows all about data and how important data is would let that happen?” Iwersen says. This remains a mystery. One senior Tesla employee had already raised internal concerns and Musk himself had warned all staff to be “extremely vigilant” after a “quite extensive and damaging” leak by another worker in 2018. “We still don’t know why the data was available for everyone — if it was just sloppiness or if it was intentional, in order to be faster,” Verfürden says.

• **Tesla shares sink lower after Elon Musk launches America Party**

It is conceivable that the casual approach to data protection may have broken the law, at least in the European Union. Yet the Dutch authorities, who are leading a multinational investigation, have yet to announce their findings more than two years after the first Handelsblatt report on the subject.

The eighth circle of hell

The second revelation in the Tesla files was the noxious working conditions at the company. To some degree these had already been an open secret. It was common knowledge that Musk would make his underlings recite a list of commandments, known as the Algorithm, that included the injunction: “Comradery is dangerous. It makes it hard for people to challenge each other’s work. There is a tendency to not want to throw a colleague under the bus. That needs to be avoided.”

Stories did the rounds about how staff had been ordered to wade through human waste after a sewage pipe burst at the original Tesla factory in Fremont. Musk openly referred to the firm’s manufacturing processes as a “production hell”, likening them to the eighth circle in Dante’s *Inferno*.

The assembly line at the Fremont facility in California

EYEVINE

Literarily minded readers may be aware that the eighth circle was reserved for those guilty of fraud, which is apt. According to the book Tesla treats many employees as frauds — loading them with huge volumes of work and then accusing them of faking it when they fall ill. That, says the book, is a large part of the reason why Tesla has such a high turnover of staff. It was typically turning over about 30 or 40 per cent of its workforce every year, the files disclosed, almost an order of magnitude higher than the rate of churn at some rival carmakers. In 2018 alone, the files suggested, roughly 70 per cent of Tesla employees had left and been replaced.

From the management’s perspective, these were the chaff that had been separated from the wheat: the idle, the hypochondriac and the faint-hearted who lacked the stamina to keep up with Musk’s “ultra-hardcore” work ethic. There was also a climate of intense suspicion. Krupski's laptop was not the only one to have Code42 spyware installed on it: the Handelsblatt journalists found that Tesla had bought 31,000 licences for the spyware in a six-month period. Other invoices showed the firm had hired former CIA and FBI officers to hunt down those who deviated from the company line.

There were plenty of workers who thrived in this swirl of cortisol and adrenaline, but many felt crushed by what they described as a climate of fear and mistrust. "It's like a cult. A totally crazy world," one German sales rep told the authors. Another worker at the Tesla gigafactory in Grünheide, near Berlin, characterised the atmosphere as "a mix between Henry Ford and Scientology".

The Grünheide facility has become an infamous battleground between Musk, who dislikes organised labour, and Germany's powerful trade unions. Staff frequently complain of working patterns that can be switched jarringly between night shifts and day shifts, leaving them exhausted. Conversely, supervisors suspect mutiny in the ranks. Last summer the plant manager caused an international stir when he accused the workforce of stealing 65,000 coffee mugs. When Handelsblatt broke this story last summer, it went viral — and it was the first time in more than a year of revelations that Musk deigned to respond. He joked on X that the company was being "mugged".

The Brandenburg factory in Grünheide has been a focus of staff disputes against Tesla's practices

SHUTTERSTOCK

The conflict escalated when Tesla started sending inspectors round to the homes of workers who had called in sick and docking the pay of those who declined to get their doctors to tell the company what was wrong. Again, Musk gave a cursory reply on X: "This sounds crazy. Looking into it," he tweeted.

The overseers wield the carrot as well as the stick: at the same time as Tesla's board tried to award Musk the largest corporate pay package in American history, every employee at the Berlin gigafactory was presented with a pair of company-branded red socks for Christmas. As if that were not recompense enough, they can also enrol for a weekly quiz on factory procedures. The first prize is a test drive of the local Tesla Cybertruck, which has apparently broken down twice on the plant's track.

Serious safety breaches

That points to the third and biggest of the issues in the Tesla files. In 2013 Musk had promised to introduce a "fully self-driving" autopilot that would enable the cars to drive across the US while their owners snoozed. The first vehicles with rudimentary versions of the software were sold on the American market in 2015. The next year Tesla released a notorious video in which one of its vehicles appeared to autonomously trundle around the San Francisco Bay Area to the soundtrack of the Rolling Stones' *Paint It Black*, while the "driver" kept his hands near the steering wheel "for legal reasons".
It was already patently clear before the Tesla files that the company had fallen some distance short of fulfilling its vision. As Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple, who bought a Tesla at the height of the autopilot hype in 2016, later put it: "It's not even close to reality. Boy, if you want a study of AI gone wrong… and trying to kill you every chance it can, get a Tesla."

What the Tesla files really showed was just how pervasive these problems were. Between 2015 and 2022 Tesla had logged more than 4,000 customer complaints about inappropriate braking and acceleration. Some of its own staff said internally that they had stopped using the autopilot because its caprices scared them. The "fully self-driving" version of the technology is not yet legal in Europe but Tesla owners can buy a more limited suite of "enhanced driver assistance" functions that take care of routine procedures such as parking or speed control on the motorway.

It turned out, however, that several German courts had found even these tools were "indisputably unusable" and a "significant hazard in urban environments to the driver and surrounding traffic". In one case a pair of German 18-year-olds were burnt to death in the back seats of a Tesla after it crashed into a tree in rural

Brandenburg, outside Berlin. Firefighters had been unable to free them because the door handles — which the book says were designed to retract at Musk's personal insistence, on aesthetic grounds — could not be released. The ADAC, the German equivalent of the AA, now advises all Tesla drivers to keep an emergency window-breaking hammer at hand for this kind of scenario.

This was the heart of the first Handelsblatt exposé in early 2023. It prompted several bereaved relatives of Tesla drivers to ask Iwersen and his team for help in finding out why the cars had crashed. These included the owner of a family-run timber business in southwest Germany, whose husband died when his Model S smashed into a barrier on a motorway near the Monte Ceneri tunnel through the Swiss Alps, flipping several times and landing more than 70 metres away. Several drivers stopped and tried to open the doors to free him, but could not. Even the firefighters who turned up 20 minutes later were unable to get in and had to watch as the car was consumed by flames.

The burnt-out wreckage of a Tesla in which two teenage passengers died after it struck a tree and caught fire in Brandenburg, Germany, 2022

ALAMY

Iwersen and Verfürden argue that Tesla has maintained an implicit policy of deliberately handing out as little information as possible about these faults. One internal document shows that staff are instructed only to provide the details "VERBALLY" (the company's own capital letters) to customers.

Since Musk helped to propel Trump to the presidency, the accidents have been reclassified in the US so that the firm does not have to report about 12 per cent of the incidents involving its vehicles.

What difference will it make?

But this line of inquiry leads back to the central question of the book and of Musk's career as a whole: does any of this make much difference? Iwersen and Verfürden note that Musk has embraced a Silicon Valley school of thought known as "longtermism", under the influence of the Scottish philosopher William MacAskill.

All decisions, by its logic, should be judged not by their consequences in the immediate future but by whether they will help the survival of the human race on a cosmological timeline of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years. When Musk is asked about the accidents linked to the Tesla autopilot system, he often points out that 1.3 million people die in road accidents around the world each year. In his view, fixating on the handful of these deaths that may have been caused by his not-quite-self-driving cars is not just stupid but immoral. If the overarching mission is to build an automated system that eliminates car accidents altogether, then anyone who gets in the way is — as Musk puts it — “killing people”.

That does not get him off the hook as far as Verfürden is concerned. “We think it’s crucial to report just how much of a black box Tesla remains when it comes to crash data, despite Musk’s own pledge to immediately disclose any critical crash data that affects public safety,” he says.

If Musk is at all bothered by their reporting, he has largely kept it to himself. Over two years in which Handelsblatt has published dozens of stories based on the Tesla files and the resulting network of sources, they have had only a handful of responses from the company, usually in the form of letters from its lawyers.

Tesla does not have a press office and it has been a perennial struggle to find anyone at the firm willing to acknowledge a request for comment. “We want to be fair and present the full picture,” Verfürden says. “It’s unfortunate they’ve never acknowledged what actually happened.”

Iwersen’s theory is that Musk has deliberately refrained from commenting on the more serious revelations so as not to draw attention to them. Some of his supporters have been more aggressive, though. When Iwersen appeared on a German political talk show, he was subjected to a tirade on X by Naomi Seibt, a young far-right influencer who appears to be Musk’s chief source of information about German politics and to have kindled his enthusiasm for the hard-right Alternative for Germany party.

The Handelsblatt team's meticulous exposure of the problems at Tesla has done nothing to obstruct the company's rise. Its share price more than doubled over the two years after the first report, although it has lost a bit of ground since then after Musk had his brief flirtation with government and European consumers turned away from the brand en masse. Iwersen and Verfürden are unperturbed.

"I don't feel good or bad if the stock goes up or down," Verfürden says. "We're just trying to provide actual information. We do feel like what you get from Mr Musk on X is not the full picture. And I think when you read the book, you have better information and you can decide for yourself."
The Tesla Files by Sonke Iwersen & Michael Verfurden (Penguin £22). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

Elon Musk Is Back at Work and Burning Through Executives

Renewed executive churn marks the billionaire's return to business

By

Tim Higgins

The sun is shining bright again in the Elon Musk business empire. Don't get burned.

The billionaire entrepreneur may still be pining for a political revolution with talk of starting his own third party to punish spendthrift Republicans, but recent high-profile departures at his companies underscore that the Boss is back.

"Thank you for your contributions," Musk—who has a way with goodbyes—told his outgoing chief executive at X, Linda Yaccarino, on Wednesday.

She announced her departure after two years on the hot seat, running the billionaire's social-media platform. Yaccarino's role was largely about trying to revive advertising for a guy who seems allergic to the art of the sale. Just days earlier, it was revealed that Omead Afshar, who was heading sales and manufacturing for Tesla in North America and Europe, had left Musk's electric-car company.

Both departures reflect an old saying among Musk alum: to survive with the mercurial leader is to avoid flying too close to the sun. Musk being the sun.

Finding shade was easier when his Department of Government Efficiency effort was churning 120 hours a week for the Trump administration. That came to an end for him in late May. Now Musk is burning hot (if not always 100% focused).

The latest executive departures also underscore Musk's complicated relationship with the sales functions at his companies. He's the ultimate salesman of the future vision. But he tends to churn through sales leaders responsible for moving today's inventories —whether that's ad spots or electric sedans.

And, these days, Musk is acting like the AI chatbots and cars will sell themselves.

That Yaccarino stayed as long as she did beat the guesses of some Madison Avenue insiders. They had privately speculated she wouldn't last long under Musk. She surprised the industry by leaving her cushy gig at NBCUniversal in 2023.

Together, she and Musk were seen as a real-life Odd Couple.

Musk has long shown disdain for traditional sales methods, arguing over the years that quality products should sell themselves. Meanwhile, Yaccarino was Ms. Sales—whether it was her polished image or pitch that Twitter-turned-X was a safe place for brands.

That last part could be hard to swallow. Musk's own actions could promote contentious content on the platform and his "Go F— Yourself" ways could be off-putting to big brands worried about negative associations.

This past week, "MechaHitler" trended on X after Musk's chatbot, Grok, generated antisemitic content. That only renewed concerns about safeguards.

When Musk took over Twitter, he said he didn't want to be CEO. It was a common refrain from him over the years, something he has said about Tesla where he has led the company since taking the reins in 2008 during financial difficulties.

He has often complained that the company can't find somebody to run things for him, unlike at his rocket company, SpaceX. There, he has long had a strong No. 2 to handle the parts of the business that interest him less—like sales.

Despite his objections to being X CEO, he clearly wanted to be the Boss. This point was driven home when his xAI startup acquired X earlier this year. Yaccarino's role was largely diminished as part of a company more broadly aiming to use Grok to compete against AI rivals such as OpenAI and Alphabet.

Over the years, I've often heard insiders talk about how it has grown increasingly hard to recruit seasoned business leaders to work for Musk because of his reputation for burning through people.

During one stretch at Tesla, the company saw more than 50 vice presidents or higher depart in a relatively short period. In some cases, a high-profile hire would join only to quietly leave a few weeks later. Some of the churn was natural attrition as options vested. Some of it was Musk growing tired of people. Some of it was employees growing tired of his grueling pace.

In 2023, amid investor concerns that Musk was too distracted from Tesla's day-to-day with his then-recent purchase of Twitter, he presided over an unusual investor meeting. Sixteen executives flanked him on stage to discuss their areas of the car company.

It was as if Musk was trying to show that Tesla was more than just him. "We obviously got significant bench strength here," Musk said at the time.

Flash forward two years, many are gone. That includes the then-CFO, who was seen as a potential replacement for Musk if the board needed it.

These days, it's rare for Tesla to highlight its bench far beyond Musk. And again, Tesla, and now X, are down key deputies when Musk faces major challenges across his companies. Tesla recently launched a limited robotaxi service amid a car-sales slump.

A few weeks ago, Musk was in a three-hour-plus meeting that ran well past midnight at his brain-implant startup, Neuralink, when his SpaceX rocket blew up, according to biographer Ashlee Vance, who was with him. "Meeting ended," Vance posted on X. "I assume that's when he learned about it. And then … he went back to work."

Hours after Yaccarino's departure announcement Wednesday, Musk was leaning into the wonky side of AI to sell xAI's newest model, Grok 4. During a near hourlong reveal streamed online, Musk talked about the AI's advanced book smarts and practical applications. One demonstration included a voice AI with an English accent being asked to write and sing an opera about Diet Coke, Musk's preferred beverage:

"Oh, Diet Coke

Thou elixir divine

With bubbles that dance

In a sparkling line

Thy crisp, cool kiss

On lips so fine ...”

As Musk sat on the dark stage flanked by young xAI employees dressed in black T-shirts, he wound things down, asking: “Anything you guys want to say?”

One engineer, near Musk, quickly applied a sort of sunscreen, blurting out: “It’s a good model, sir.”

The UV index is high.

Write to Tim Higgins at tim.higgins@wsj.com

Why Elon Musk may have reached the end of the road at Tesla

Concerns over the increasingly divisive boss have raised a once-unthinkable question

James TitcombTechnology Editor

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One way to antagonise Elon Musk is to mention that he did not found Tesla. The electric car maker was incorporated by Martin Eberhard and Marc Tarpenning in 2003, a year before Musk led an investment in the company. But for most of Tesla’s history, Musk has been synonymous with it. Few motorists could tell you who runs Kia or Nissan, but many Tesla owners talk as if they are on a first name basis with “Elon”.

Imagining Tesla without its mercurial boss, who sparked the electric vehicle revolution, is like imagining Disney without Mickey Mouse.

But an increasingly loud chorus is questioning whether Tesla might be better off without its volatile chief executive (his official title at the company is Technoking).

The company’s sales have fallen sharply in recent months in a move tied to his support of Donald Trump and far-Right parties including Germany’s AfD, with the historically progressive consumer base that bought most electric cars distancing themselves from Musk.

In recent weeks, the company’s shares have also plunged as Musk has fallen out with the US president and set up his own “America Party”.

His row with Trump, which has seen the president threaten to deport Musk, appeared to scotch any chance of the company receiving favourable treatment over EV credits and driverless car regulation.

It could also turn off millions of Maga drivers who might have filled the void left by Tesla’s more liberal former fans.

“In real life he would be sacked from Tesla and somebody would actually run the company,” says Ross Gerber, an early investor who has called for Musk to go.

“If he’s going to do politics, then he shouldn’t be the chief executive. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done at Tesla.”

Political distractions

Most investors have said they want Musk to stay in charge of the company, but they want him to commit to the job full time.
Despite his frequent controversies, he is recognised as a uniquely talented executive who has repeatedly defied his doubters.

Sales may be in decline, but the company is pressing ahead with the launch of driverless taxi rides in the US, a business that Musk has said is Tesla’s future.

In May, a group of shareholders wrote to Tesla’s board asking that Musk commit to working 40 hours a week at the company.

“The current crisis at Tesla puts into sharp focus the long-term problems at the company stemming from the CEO’s absence, which is amplified by a board that appears largely uninterested and unwilling to act,” it said.

At the time, Musk acknowledged the concerns, promising to pare back his work at the White House's department of government efficiency and return "24/7" to his businesses, which also include rocket company SpaceX and social network X.

But his spat with Trump and promises to end America's two-party system indicated that he had once again become distracted.

The public feud between Musk and Trump has shaken investor confidence in Tesla Credit: Evan Vucci/AP

On Monday, Tesla's shares fell 8pc as Musk's launch of the America Party reignited questions about his commitment to Tesla.

James Fishback, a Trump-supporting investment manager, has written to Tesla's board asking it to force Musk to clarify his political ambitions.

"This [running a party] is a full-time job, and the question is whether this full-time job is compatible with his full-time job as Tesla chief executive," he says.

"When Elon deviates from its core competency and does things that are self destructive, the share price rightfully responds."

Individual shareholders, however disgruntled, have little influence over Musk. The company's board, which would be formally responsible for firing him if it came to it, contains several Musk allies.

In May, Robyn Denholm, the company's chairman, swiftly denied a Wall Street Journal report that the company had started looking for a successor. And the majority of shareholders last year backed a $56bn (£41bn) pay package for its chief executive.

Who could replace Musk?

There would also be the tricky task of replacing Musk, who, as the company's largest shareholder, would continue to be actively involved.

Last week X's chief executive Linda Yaccarino resigned after two years in which she had regularly been undermined by Musk's behaviour.

The most likely candidate would be an insider such as JB Straubel, the company's former technology chief, or Tesla's chief designer Franz von Holzhausen.

Musk would bristle at any attempt to replace him. He has said he wants to run Tesla for another five years, predicting that it will be the most valuable company in the world.

When Wall Street analyst Dan Ives last week called on the board to rein him in, Musk tweeted back: "Shut up, Dan".

But not long ago, merely questioning whether Musk was the right man to run Tesla would have been blasphemy. Today, it seems up for debate.