

54. Autonomy Day

In April 2019, during a period marked by financial strain and the looming threat of bankruptcy, Elon Musk conceived the idea for Tesla's Autonomy Day, a groundbreaking event aimed to showcase Tesla's advancements in autonomous driving technology and attract essential funding. Struggling with sleepless nights, Musk, alongside his partner Grimes, wore the weight of Tesla's future heavily. Amid these challenges, Musk's relentless push towards realizing the dream of a fully autonomous car since 2016 found a new manifestation: A planned demonstration of Tesla's partially self-driving car technology to investors and the world.

This period was characterized by Musk's intense drive, leading to a feverish push to create a credible demonstration of autonomous driving capabilities in just four weeks. Despite the lack of a fully autonomous vehicle, Musk aimed to convince both Tesla's team and potential investors that they were on the brink of achieving this groundbreaking feat. Consequently, Tesla embarked on an ambitious, all-out effort to meet Musk's daunting expectations, culminating in the Autonomy Day presentation on April 22, 2019. Musk's vision was to showcase a car capable of performing complex maneuvers autonomously, including navigating multiple turns and highway driving around Tesla's headquarters.

Musk's approach during this high-pressure time was not without its tolls, leading to significant stress within the team and prompting intense interventions from close associates and team leaders to temper his drastic management decisions. Amidst the chaos, the team managed to integrate new functionalities into the Autopilot system, such as recognizing traffic lights, a feature that highlighted the incremental but crucial advancements toward autonomy.

Autonomy Day was a blend of Elon Musk's characteristic mix of visionary goals and strategic promotion. He reiterated his prediction of Tesla achieving full vehicle autonomy within a year and outlined an ambitious plan to deploy a million Robotaxis, vehicles that would embody the culmination of his long-standing dream for autonomous transport. This declaration, while emblematic of Musk's aspirational rhetoric, also underscored the ongoing challenges and the uncertain journey ahead for Tesla in the race towards achieving complete self-driving technology.