

New Generation Of Tech CEOs At Uber, Microsoft And Google Lead With Culture

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If three makes a trend, then a new trend in leadership has emerged among technology companies: leading with corporate culture. In recent years, three leading technology players — [Uber](#), [Microsoft](#), and [Google](#) — have installed new CEOs whose primary missions seem to be more about core values than core technology. And to accomplish that mission, this new generation of CEOs use a leadership style that is more empathetic and less testosterone-fueled than the old school approaches that distinguished their predecessors.



Brian Smale

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella is one of a new generation of culture-first tech leaders.

[Sundar Pichai](#) became CEO of [Google](#) when Alphabet Inc. was established as its parent company in October 2015. Businessweek has [observed](#) that Pichai has "recast Google's mission in the most dramatic way since the search engine went live 20 years ago" by evangelizing artificial intelligence. But his efforts to remake the company also include cultivating a more collaborative culture. In an profile entitled, "[For Google's New CEO Sundar Pichai, a Low-Key Style Pays Off](#)," *The Wall Street Journal* describes Pichai's "ability to identify competitive pressures, manage others and smooth over differences, both internally and with Google's business partners."

Pichai's leadership on culture was demonstrated recently when an employee published a memo entitled "[Google's](#)

[Ideological Echo Chamber](#)” that criticized the company’s treatment of people with conservative viewpoints and its deliberate efforts to hire and develop more female engineers. Although Google's culture thrives on freedom of expression, Pichai decided to fire the employee because he felt the memo was contrary to the company's basic values and Code of Conduct. He received significant criticism for the decision in the media and among some Google employees, but he seemed confident it was the right thing to do to reinforce the company culture he is trying to cultivate.

Then there's [Dara Khosrowshahi](#) who was named CEO of [Uber](#) after the dramatic ouster of founder Travis Kalanick following the revelation of a corporate culture plagued with sexism and harassment. Khosrowshahi, [described](#) in [The Washington Post](#) as "even-keeled and low-key" and praised for the [gender equality](#) at his former company Expedia, is clearly a sharp contrast to Kalanick as well as other executives who had been considered for the post including former GE CEO Jeff Immelt.

Hired with the clear mandate of fixing the company's broken corporate culture, Khosrowshahi explicitly [declared](#) in his first address to Uber employees, "This company has to change." Soon after, he initiated a process of developing new core values from the ground up, commissioning focus groups and soliciting input from all employees. He recently unveiled the "new cultural norms" to Uber employees and in a [post](#) on LinkedIn. The list of new values was punctuated by a short statement that seemed a verdict on the company's past culture: "We do the right thing. Period."

[Satya Nadella](#), [Microsoft's](#) new CEO, is the third new tech leader to comprise the trend of leading with culture. Like Google's Pichai, Nadella has been working on changing Microsoft's business with efforts focused on cloud computing and AI in the three years since he took the reins at the company. But also like Pichai — and Khosrowshahi — he's emphasized the cultural changes that have been needed to achieve the product changes. In fact, he describes in his new book, [Hit Refresh: The Quest to Rediscover Microsoft's Soul and Imagine a Better Future for Everyone](#), the company's transformation as "a renaissance". And he [talks](#) about creating "a virtuous cycle — between the product or concept you're creating, the capability that is needed to execute on it, and the culture that reinforces them."

Clearly Nadella is a different man from previous Microsoft CEOs Steve Ballmer, who [Forbes](#) [describes](#) as "high wattage." [The Washington Post](#) has [compiled a list](#) of Nadella's frequent literary references, including quoting Nietzsche in an investors' call and Oscar Wilde in a memo to employees. At a [Vanity Fair summit](#), he explained the need for empathy by relaying a personal family story.

The emergence of a new generation of leaders makes sense. Today's workforce is comprised of people, many Millennials, who want a different kind of leader from those who held top posts in the past. Supportive, inspiring, and collaborative leaders who attend to company culture as much as they do balance sheets are favored. And at technology companies, where issues of privacy and ethics are heightened, investors, board members, and other stakeholders are discovering the necessity of leaders who value humanity as much as capability and productivity.

It also doesn't seem a coincidence that all three of these leaders are people of color and immigrants. Articles on [CNN Money](#) and [Huffington Post](#) suggest that immigrants are increasingly taking leadership positions in corporate America in general and Silicon Valley specifically. Their backgrounds suggest they are naturally more culturally-aware. Sharon Gillenwater, the founder and editor-in-chief of [Boardroom Insiders](#), [reports](#) that immigrant CEOs emphasize qualities like humility when they talk about their career journeys, and she observes that they tend to value and prioritize diversity if they personally have had to overcome prejudice.

Leaders like Pichai, Khosrowshahi, and Nadella seem to be ushering a new era of leadership — one that recognizes that cultural transformation is critical driver of business transformation. [Culture is not incidental or instrumental to business performance — it's instrumental.](#)