

Where will Sundar Pichai take Google?

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There were louder executives at Google. There were brainier ones. There were more aggressive ones and those who were doubtlessly better at throwing a sharp elbow, too. And many more political ones — even if those who have been running one of the world's most powerful companies continued to think of themselves as benign, long after it was clear to everyone else that they were many things but that.

Most of them are gone. Most are as rich as Croesus. But they're not at the pinnacle of one of the mightiest companies on the planet.

Because in the end, the nice guy — Sundar Pichai — finished first. Mr. Pichai on Tuesday was named chief executive of Alphabet, the company chassis under which the unbeatable and wildly profitable search engine lives, along with a number of other less impressive initiatives. The soft-spoken executive, who was born in India, had worked his way up a long ladder from product manager to vice president to chief executive of Google. Now this big announcement.

Because the myth of the founder is so strong in Silicon Valley, the end of the era of the two quirky founders — Larry Page, who was chief executive, and Sergey Brin, who was president — seems like a big deal.

In reality, the pair have been managing very little of the real business, having checked out a long time ago.

Their myriad interests have diverged from running the business that allowed them to have myriad interests. (Google's first "adult" supervision — the former Google chief executive Eric Schmidt — has also moved on.)

But in giving up their executive titles, Mr. Brin and Mr. Page will give up none of their power. The pair — who at times are still called "the boys" internally, even though they are both 46 — will remain on the board and will

Alphabet's new chief executive has a plate full of challenges. But it's still a company with a lot of potential.

also continue to hold most of the company's voting shares, giving them de facto control.

In their letter bidding this faux adieu, they played the role of two super-dads who were ready to say goodbye to the 21-year-old company they started in a garage

(yes, as clichéd as it sounds, it was just that) to the hilt:

"While it has been a tremendous privilege to be deeply involved in the day-to-day management of the company for so long, we believe it's time to assume the role of proud parents — offering advice and love, but not daily nagging!"

What an adorable metaphor — even though they'll keep nagging.

Still, the patient Mr. Pichai will finally be the face of the company, and in that he is like Satya Nadella of Microsoft and Tim Cook of Apple, both of whom were loyal lieutenants given the reins by charismatic leaders.

And that is what is most important,



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since the company Mr. Pichai now leads faces its most vexing challenges ever. They include struggling with the ever-louder voices of employees — whom Mr. Brin and Mr. Page reared to be very noisy — as they speak out about whom the company should do business with and how best to deal with sexual harassment, lack of diversity, hate speech and the manipulation of its platforms like YouTube.

And there's the external pressure from regulators worldwide who wonder how big is too big and a media that no longer thinks tech hung the moon.

And even though these messes were all the inevitable result of how Mr.

Page and Mr. Brin built it all in the first place, there was a feeling that if only they re-engaged, it would all go back to a time when life was more "Googley." That is the term the company used a lot when it was young, and while it's certainly charming, it represents high-minded ideals that have been a burden to live up to.

Now it's clear that the buck will stop with Mr. Pichai, ending confusion both inside and outside about who was in charge. His purview is large, including search, advertising, mapping, smartphones, video, drones, artificial intelligence and, as recently announced, new breakthroughs in quantum computing, the next great arena in tech.

It was only a month ago that Google said it had achieved "quantum supremacy." As *The New York Times* noted:

A quantum machine could one day drive big advances in areas like artificial intelligence and make even the most powerful supercomputers look like toys. The Google device did in 3 minutes 20 seconds a mathematical calculation that supercomputers could not complete in under 10,000 years, the company said in its paper. Scientists likened Google's announcement to the Wright brothers' first plane flight in 1903 — proof that something is really possible even though it may be years before it can fulfill its potential.

We'll see. And we'll be watching as Mr. Pichai pilots Alphabet and Google to their next destination.

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