

WILL KNIGHT STEVEN LEVY BUSINESS NOV 20, 2023 10:13 AM

# OpenAI Staff Threaten to Quit Unless Board Resigns

More than 730 employees of OpenAI have signed a letter saying they may quit and join Sam Altman at Microsoft unless the startup's board resigns and reappoints the ousted CEO.



Sam Altman speaks during the OpenAI DevDay event on November 6, 2023, in San Francisco JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES



**OPENAI WAS IN** open revolt on Monday with more than 730 employees signing an open letter threatening to leave unless the board resigns and reinstates Sam Altman as CEO, along with cofounder and former president Greg Brockman. Altman was controversially fired by the board on Friday.

“The process through which you terminated Sam Altman and removed Greg Brockman from the board has jeopardized all of this work and undermined our mission and company,” the letter reads. “Your conduct has made it clear you did not have the competence to oversee OpenAI.”

Remarkably, the letter’s signees include Ilya Sutskever, the company’s chief scientist and a member of its board, who has been blamed for coordinating the boardroom coup against Altman in the first place. By 5:10 pm ET on Monday, some 738 out of OpenAI’s around 770 employees, or about 95 percent of the company, had signed the letter.

Shortly before the letter was released, Sutskever posted on X: “I deeply regret my participation in the board’s actions. I never intended to harm OpenAI. I love everything we’ve built together and I will do everything I can to reunite the company.”

The letter’s release follows an extraordinary, head-spinning weekend in Silicon Valley. OpenAI’s board removed Altman from his position on Friday, claiming “he was not consistently candid in his communications with the board, hindering its ability to exercise its responsibilities.”



## How OpenAI's Bizarre Structure Gave 4 People the Power to Fire Sam Altman

Chaos at OpenAI has its root in an unusual corporate structure designed to protect humanity against rogue AI—some investors had expressed fears it could weaken the company.

BY PARESH DAVE

Mira Murati, OpenAI's chief technology officer, was appointed as interim CEO.

After blowback from investors, including Microsoft, OpenAI's board seemed open to having Altman return to lead the company. Altman posted a photo of himself wearing a visitors' badge at the company's headquarters on Sunday. But last night, the board told staff that Altman would not be returning to the company.

Hours later, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella announced that Altman and Brockman would be joining the tech giant to head a new advanced AI research unit.

Nadella appeared to leave the door open to any OpenAI employees eager to jump ship, adding of Altman's new Microsoft subsidiary: "We look forward to moving quickly to provide them with the resources needed for their success."

Nadella also said on X that the new venture would be “setting a new pace for innovation,” suggesting a more aggressive approach than the OpenAI board was apparently comfortable with.

In another rapid-fire reshuffle, OpenAI’s board chose to remove Murati and appoint another interim CEO, Emmett Shear, the former CEO of Twitch, the video game streaming site.

Some OpenAI staff stayed up all night debating a course of action following news that Altman would not return to OpenAI. Many staff were frustrated about a lack of communication over Altman’s firing. Dozens of employees appeared to signal their willingness to jump ship and join Altman last night by posting “OpenAI is nothing without its people” on X.

In their letter, the OpenAI staff threaten to join Altman at Microsoft. “Microsoft has assured us that there are positions for all OpenAI employees at this new subsidiary should we choose to join,” they write.

The precise reason for Altman’s removal remains unclear, even to many inside the company. “Despite many requests for specific facts for your allegations, you have never provided any written evidence,” the letter says in its message to the board.



## Microsoft Emerges as the Winner in OpenAI Chaos

Microsoft has hired OpenAI cofounders Sam Altman and Greg Brockman to head a new advanced AI team, acquiring one of the most successful management groups in the AI industry.

BY MORGAN MEAKER, AMIT KATWALA, AND PETER GUEST

Besides calling for the current board—made up of Ilya Sutskever, Adam D'Angelo, Helen Toner, and Tasha McCauley—to resign, the letter requests that two new independent lead board members, Bret Taylor and Will Hurd, be appointed. Taylor is a tech industry veteran with close ties to Altman; Hurd is a politician who previously served on the OpenAI board.

The letter raises the very real prospect of OpenAI losing almost all of its staff, and Microsoft essentially acqui-hiring the entire company. OpenAI has around 770 total staff.

The wild saga also highlights OpenAI's unusual governance structure, which gave a few nonprofit board members extraordinary power of the hottest tech company in the world.

The episode also reveals how divisive the race to develop artificial intelligence has become among many involved with developing the technology.

Altman's efforts to raise money for OpenAI and to turn its offerings into commercial products may have unsettled board members, who saw their responsibility as ensuring that AI is developed safely.

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OpenAI's meteoric rise in the year since ChatGPT was released has been accompanied with growing talk about the risks that increasingly advanced AI may pose.

The letter reads:

*To the Board of Directors at OpenAI,*

*OpenAI is the world's leading AI company. We, the employees of OpenAI, have developed the best models and pushed the field to new frontiers. Our work on AI safety and governance shapes global norms. The products we built are used by millions of people around the world. Until now, the company we work for and cherish has never been in a stronger position.*

*The process through which you terminated Sam Altman and removed Greg Brockman from the board has jeopardized all of this work and undermined our mission and company. Your conduct has made it clear you did not have the competence to oversee OpenAI.*

*When we all unexpectedly learned of your decision, the leadership team of OpenAI acted swiftly to stabilize the company. They carefully listened to your concerns and tried to cooperate with you on all grounds. Despite many requests for specific facts for your allegations, you have never provided any written evidence. They also increasingly realized you were not capable of carrying out your duties, and were negotiating in bad faith.*

*The leadership team suggested that the most stabilizing path forward – the one that would best serve our mission, company, stakeholders, employees and the public – would be for you to resign and put in place a qualified board that could lead the company forward in stability.*



*Leadership worked with you around the clock to find a mutually agreeable outcome. Yet within two days of your initial decision, you again replaced interim CEO Mira Murati against the best interests of the company. You also informed the leadership team that allowing the company to be destroyed “would be consistent with the mission.”*

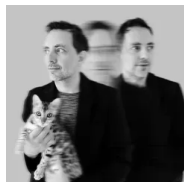
*Your actions have made it obvious that you are incapable of overseeing OpenAI. We are unable to work for or with people that lack competence, judgement and care for our mission and employees. We, the undersigned, may choose to resign from OpenAI and join the newly announced Microsoft subsidiary run by Sam*

*Altman and Greg Brockman. Microsoft has assured us that there are positions for all OpenAI employees at this new subsidiary should we choose to join. We will take this step imminently, unless all current board members resign, and the board appoints two new lead independent directors, such as Bret Taylor and Will Hurd, and reinstates Sam Altman and Greg Brockman.*

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## How to Stop Another OpenAI Meltdown

OpenAI designed its governance structure to protect humanity—and it imploded. The company could take pointers from Mozilla and other projects combining lofty goals with for-profit ventures.

PARESH DAVE





## OpenAI Cofounder Reid Hoffman Gives Sam Altman a Vote of Confidence

LinkedIn and OpenAI cofounder Reid Hoffman says he's glad Sam Altman is leading the AI company again. Hoffman and other AI experts discussed the perils and potential of AI at a WIRED event Tuesday.

PARESH DAVE



## OpenAI's Ilya Sutskever Has a Plan for Keeping Super-Intelligent AI in Check

The Superalignment team led by OpenAI chief scientist Ilya Sutskever has devised a way to guide the behavior of AI models as they get ever smarter.



## Google DeepMind's Demis Hassabis Says Gemini Is a New Breed of AI

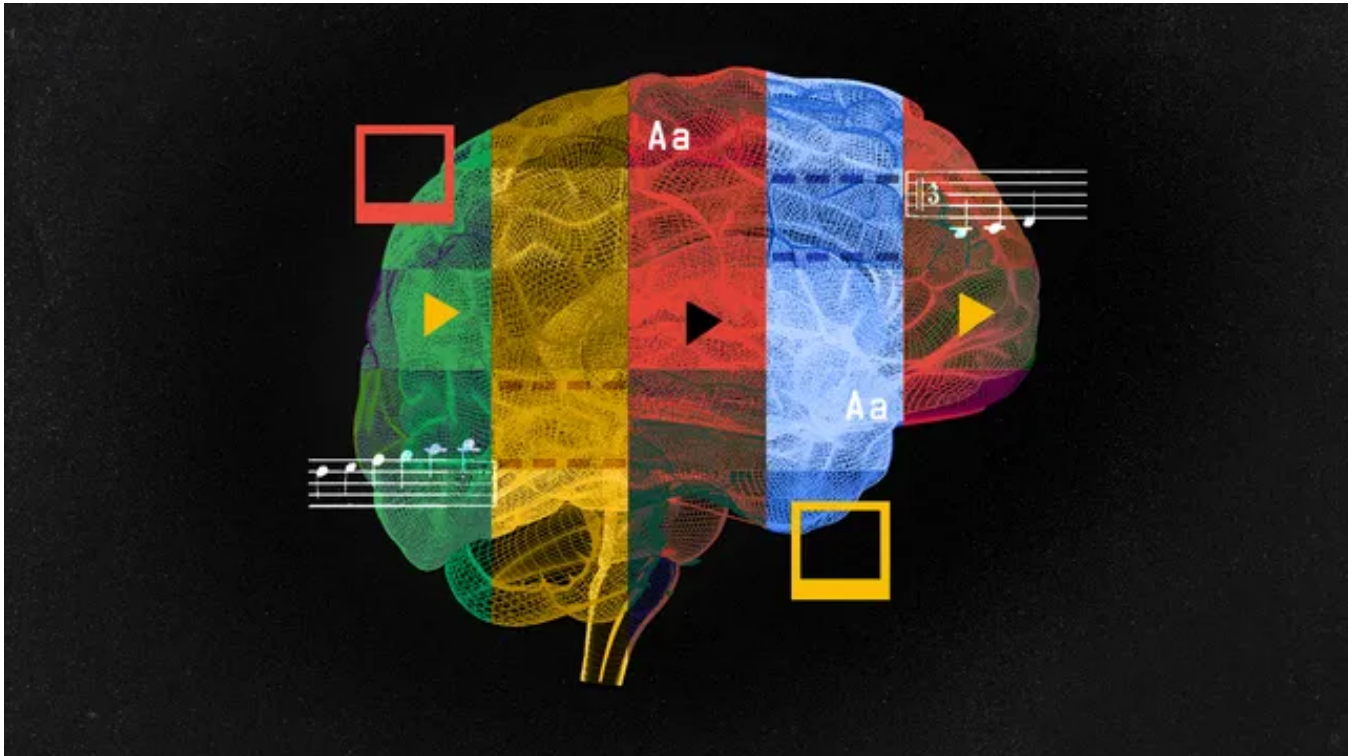
Google's new AI model Gemini launched today inside the Bard chatbot. It could go on to advance robotics and other projects, says Demis Hassabis, the AI executive leading the project.

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## America's Big AI Safety Plan Faces a Budget Crunch

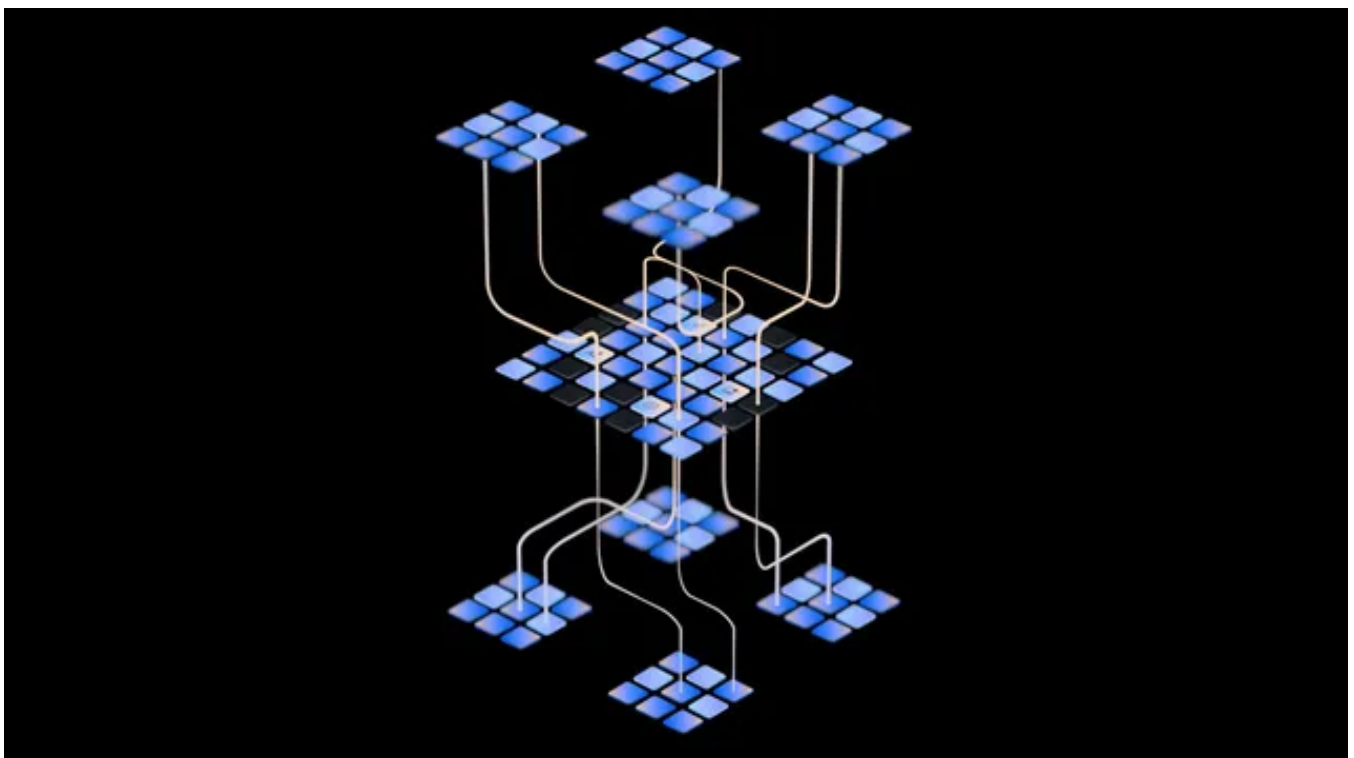
NIST, the US agency Joe Biden tasked with curbing the risks of AI, lacks the necessary resources. Lawmakers are concerned it could be forced to rely on private companies developing the technology.



## Google Just Launched Gemini, Its Long-Awaited Answer to ChatGPT

Google says Gemini, launching today inside the Bard chatbot, is its “most capable” AI model ever. It was trained on video, images, and audio as well as text.

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## Google’s Gemini Is the Real Start of the Generative AI Boom

A new AI model from Google—called Gemini—is fresh competition for OpenAI’s ChatGPT. The AI rivals are now working on even more radical ideas.

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More US states are moving to bar companies from binding workers with noncompete agreements. Research shows the move could boost wages and innovation.

CAITLIN HARRINGTON

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