It was the F heard around the world. Phil Savage sent a six-word retort to a piece of hate e-mail shortly after the Browns escaped Buffalo with a win on Monday. Assuming the e-mail was received through his Browns work address, what transpired next was a cautionary tale about the notorious lack of privacy associated with office e-mails. Erik Cassano weighs in with his thoughts on the Phil Savage debacle.

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Phil Savage sent a six-word retort to a piece of hate e-mail shortly after the Browns escaped Buffalo with a win on Monday. Assuming the e-mail was received through his Browns work address, what transpired next was a cautionary tale about the notorious lack of privacy associated with office e-mails.

In response to being called the worst GM in football by a North Royalton Browns fan known only to the public as "Brett," Savage fired back with "Go root for Buffalo. F--- you." Except the F word was spelled out in entirety.

By Wednesday, sports humor site Deadspin.com broke the story nationally, recognizing the shock value in an NFL executive F-bombing an irate fan, and having it not be Al Davis. Deadspin was reportedly tipped off by a Pittsburgh radio station, proving once again that Steelers fans will stop twisting the knife in our collective back once we stop giving them a knife to twist.

But as long as embarrassing things like this keep happening, the knife will remain.

By Thursday, the evidence was damning enough that Savage needed to step up and say something. Which, of course, meant .... Romeo Crennel said something in Savage's absence.

"We all get frustrated at times. Phil, generally, like the rest of us, tries to be professional and hold it in, but sometimes some things slip out. It's unfortunate that it slipped out," Crennel told reporters.

The Plain Dealer later received an e-mailed admission from Savage, who was on a scouting trip in California. Savage noted that he and the fan apologized to each other. Through a spokesman, Randy Lerner told The Plain Dealer that the matter is over.

But the ramifications are still hanging in the air like pea soup fog, which is generally the outcome when a team executive is caught behaving in an unexecutive -like fashion.

If Savage is spending even a fraction of a minute responding to hate mail from fans, his priorities can be questioned. His team is 4-6. His defense is a disaster. His feature running back is rapidly deteriorating. His number one receiver can't catch passes. His star tight end is a loose cannon. His starting quarterback is two starts into his career. For the money he makes, Savage's days should revolve around improving the Browns roster, with enough eating and sleeping to get by.

If he's reading fan mail, let alone responding to it, that seems like a remarkable waste of time. Even at 12:17 a.m., the time stamp on the offending correspondence.

On the other hand, e-mail has made previously hard-to-access people far more accessible. E-mail easily skirts around receptionists, gatekeepers, security guards and other support staffers who traditionally have formed concentric barriers between high-profile people and the public at large.

Before e-mail, a fan with an axe to grind would have needed to type out a letter and snail-mail it to Browns headquarters, where it would have passed through multiple sets of hands before even reaching the desk of someone in Savage's office. The likelihood that Savage would even have seen the letter is extremely small.

Now, fan snark can reach someone like Savage at 12:17 in the morning after an understandably-stressful game, right when he's at his most tired and irritable. At that point, decorum and good judgment can easily take a backseat. At 12:17 a.m.

after a stressful day at work, the entire world, let alone a rogue heckler, can shove it. We've all been there.

But the difference is, where just about any of us would have wanted to tell Brett from North Royalton to shove it had we been in Savage's shoes, Savage acted on it. Therein lies the problem.

The evidence that suggests Savage has struggled with the people-skill aspects of being an NFL GM is mounting. Dating to the Kellen Winslow fiasco of nearly a month ago, this is now twice that Savage's temper has become directly or indirectly part of a public display that has fueled the growing fan and media perception that the inmates are in charge at the Browns' asylum.

This is now twice that Crennel has publicly commented on a matter involving Savage before Savage even made an appearance.
Crennel gets a lot of flack for his inadequate game management skills and lack of desire to take a hardline stance on anything controversial. But he's got two on Savage in the taking-one-for-the-team department.

It simply does not look good when the GM of an NFL team has a falling-out with his star tight-end, then leaves his coach to not only deal with the tight end, but also explain the GM's side of things at the inevitable press conference. It really doesn't look good when the GM of an NFL team gets caught swearing in an e-mail to a fan, then leaves his coach to say "he didn't mean it" because (oh darn) the GM has to catch a flight to the West Coast.

These might end up being small transgressions in the long run, but it all points to the possibility that Savage is starting to buckle under the pressure of public criticism and malcontent players like Winslow who are all too happy to take their cause to the microphones when their outstretched palms aren't lined with more greenbacks.

Unfortunately for Savage, dealing with these situations is an essential skill for any administrator in professional sports. If you can't handle people, you can't handle the job.

This is the risk any team takes when it hires a scout used to trolling the college ranks in relative anonymity and sticks him on the highest pedestal as the face of organizational management. Randy Lerner and Savage had to know heading into

this working relationship that the administrative aspects of the job were the areas in which Savage needed the most grooming.

Unfortunately, inheriting a train wreck of an organization in 2005, he more or less had to fling himself to the wolves.

Amassing talent was the order of the day in the early part of Savage's tenure, so anything else in which he was deficient could be more easily overlooked. But now, as the fourth season of the Savage-Crennel regime comes down the home stretch, Savage -- much like the team he's put on the field -- still looks like an incomplete product. In his attitude and conduct, he has not made the progression from scout to administrator, and time is running out. The rumor mill already has Lerner offering total control of the Browns' football operations to Bill Cowher
.

In the end, it's one swear word to one fan who probably deserved it. But one four-letter word speaks volumes about the thin ice upon which Savage is skating.