Apparently both Eric Mangini and Randy Lerner have a gag reflex. And, as should be expected when dysfunction is the chief characteristic of their operating manual, they are on the wrong page again. In Gary's latest, he talks about the evolving mess that is our Cleveland Browns and all the mistakes that have been made here in 2009. He hits on Randy Lerner's post-game comments, marvels at his incompetence, and theorizes what could potentially be coming next.

Writer's Note: *Although the following column was written before Randy Lerner fired general manager George Kokinis, nothing much else has changed.*

How do you fire someone who was never really there in the first place?

All Lerner did was save some money, maybe, although that never seems to be much of a concern as the money he's currently paying all the former coaches and front office types still his payroll could probably push the Cleveland Indians into the top third of baseball payrolls.

Although the Browns haven't commented on the Kokinis firing other than to confirm it, speculation is that Kokinis was offended by Lerner's public comments about the team seeking a credible front office leader.

Why Kokinis would be offended by that statement is anyone's guess.

He had to know from the outset that the circumstances of his hiring made him neither credible nor a leader.

Lerner was just speaking the truth. With him gone a void still exists, no less or no more than when the day began on Monday.

As for where this leaves Mangini, just picture Michael Corleone in the Godfather as the world around him begins to close in.

Apparently both Eric Mangini and Randy Lerner have a gag reflex. And, as should be expected when dysfunction is the chief characteristic of their operating manual, they are on the wrong page again.

Mangini finally saw enough of Derek Anderson on Sunday to realize that simply saying an improvement is happening, even if you're saying it over and over, doesn't mean it's actually happening. After seemingly hitting rock bottom two weeks ago against the Green Bay Packers, Anderson proved that there are still more depths to plumb against Chicago. With 3 minutes remaining, even Mangini couldn't stand to see anymore and put in Brady Quinn.

Sure, the Browns had already been embarrassed again and sure the move, in context, didn't make any sense. But in a season where nothing else has made sense, this was just another twig on the pile. In actuality it was probably Mangini making a point to offensive coordinator Brian Daboll about disastrous weekly game.

It was the wrong point.

The right one came from Lerner, the most elusive of owners, finally coming out of the closet to witness the massacre for himself from a field-level tunnel inside of Chicago's Soldier Field.

After the game, Lerner finally dropped word that he has seen enough. Not enough, perhaps, to fire Mangini, but enough to say that at 1-7 heading into the bye week, this team has regressed to the point that the season thus far has been a near total waste for everyone involved, coaches, fans, and players.

Now Lerner wants to install a credible voice at the top of the organization.

Apparently that means Mangini is neither credible nor omnipotent.

Whoa, Randy, not so fast.

It's not news anymore that Lerner more than anyone else is to blame for the sorry state of affairs. I was suspicious of the hiring of Eric Mangini from the outset and said so because of the half-assed process Lerner used to make that decision.

Feeling burned by the hiring of Romeo Crennel, a lifelong assistant repeatedly passed over for head coaching jobs, Lerner felt he needed an experienced head coach and needed him NOW.

When Mangini was suddenly available after being fired by the New York Jets, Lerner pounced like an alcoholic at a beer truck and negotiated against himself to hire someone no one else wanted anyway.

To further compound the problem, he hired Mangini before he could even put in place a general manager. Then Lerner let Mangini hire his own general manager, which put the Claude Rains of general managers, George Kokinis, in the unenviable position of being beholden to Mangini instead of it being the other way around.

It's fascinating that 8 games into the season when another year has been lost and perhaps more, Lerner is just now starting to see the errors of his ways and articulating answers before he truly understands that the problem lies deep within.

It's just as fascinating that Lerner will be meeting with the two fans trying to organize a protest for the Monday night game against Baltimore.

If Lerner is doing it to stave off an insurrection, then he's miscalculated again.

Whether or not this little protest would ever have gained much traction, Lerner has long since lost a generation of fans over the sheer incompetence that has exemplified the operations in Berea since his father bought the team.

As fascinating and troubling as this all is, just know that one of the few positives of this miserable season is that Lerner has arrived at the party, finally. He may be late. He may not even realize that he's late.

But he's now at the party and continuing to beat him up for being standoffish about the whole thing initially is mostly beside the point.

Taking Lerner just at his few words, he seems to get it. He seems to really, finally, understand that hiring Mangini was a mistake, at least without pairing Mangini with an even stronger voice to whom he has to report.

If you accept as fact, as I do, that Lerner has no plans on selling the team, then this time is really best used to help Lerner help himself. The two so-called fan representatives with whom he plans on meeting is a nice public relations play but it won't help the cause. There's been enough of the "I've been a fan for X years and this is just sad" kind of comments.

What Lerner needs is advice and not just on who to hire next.

The advice he needs is far more fundamental.

Here's some:

First, before concluding that he's going to keep Mangini or his sock-puppet boss

George Kokinis, and before landing on whomever he wants to run this franchise, Lerner needs to do more than a little soul-searching. He needs to grab himself a yellow pad, a ball point pen, and lock himself inside his home office or whatever man cave he retreats to when he wants to contemplate the cosmos.

Alone, he must use the time wisely. He's 47 years of age, now is the time to find out what he stands for as a person. What are his core values?

What does he expect from himself not just as a business person but as a member of this planet?

He may think this is unnecessary.

He may think it's mindless.

But he ignores it at his own peril because it fundamentally sets up what is to come next.

Second, Lerner has to translate those deep thoughts to this business. He needs to ask himself what the Cleveland Browns should stand for?

What should its core values be?

Are he and his team on the same page?

If they aren't how can he expect anyone associated with the team to work in concert?

It's time for Lerner, alone, to set the tone for this franchise based on what he's all about.

Part of the problem with Lerner all along is that he's let everyone from Butch Davis to Phil Savage to Romeo Crennel to Eric Mangini and God knows how many others tell him what his team should stand for. But everyone of these fine ideas

spun out of control because the person at the controls, Lerner, never was given a map. As a wise men once told me, if you don't know where you're going anywhere will get you there. For too long, Lerner has been about trying to accomplish what someone else wants done.

It's why progress never gets made.

There is no measuring stick.

It's easy for those looking for a job to mouth words like "excellence," "discipline," "pride." But everyone has their own definitions of what that means. Lerner's task is first and foremost to define those values for himself and his franchise and then interview anyone seeking employment with his team, from the top job to the next ball boy-head-coach-in-training, against those principles.

Don't test them to see if they say the right things.

Make them show you in word and deed that they are completely in sync with what you want to accomplish.

If they aren't move on to the next candidate.

Second, once having decided what he and his franchise truly are about, he should fire Mangini. This may seem somewhat inconsistent with the first point until you realize that no matter what Lerner stands for Mangini doesn't.

Mangini lost his job in New York because the owner felt he lost the locker room. I n Cleveland he never got it.

True, every new coach has to earn it, but Mangini thus far has shown no capacity of cracking that barrier.

The players, as is their wont, were skeptical of him coming in and all he's done

since is give them reasons to be more skeptical.

He treats the media, who, after all, serve only as a proxy for the fans, with derision.

His thought processes are just random enough to keep everyone ill-informed.

His system of discipline is sophomoric.

In short, Mangini treats no one with the dignity and respect he demands for himself.

You don't need to take my word for all of this, just listen to the words of players like Jamal Lewis. He's been around enough coaches and enough situations to know that when something's not right, it's wrong.

Lewis, emotional after the Chicago game to the point of announcing his retirement, summed up well what the rest of us have been trying to tell Lerner for some time now. As Lewis said, "I don't know what's going on. In the past, where I've been, that has never happened."

Lewis then said that the players supposedly bought into the Mangini system in training camp, but then it all just mostly fell apart in the blur of loss after loss after loss after loss.

Taking some pains not to completely blame Mangini, Lewis nevertheless essentially did, explaining that he doesn't understand what Mangini is trying to accomplish on either side of the ball. Amen. No one does.

Third, if Lerner can't find it in his heart or his wallet to dump Mangini now, then at least have him dump Brian Daboll, as overmatched of an offensive coordinator as there ever has been in the league.

Mangini gave Daboll the job because Daboll used to coach the quarterbacks in New York. That in and of itself is stunning but probably explains why Brett Favre is in Minnesota. All Daboll has done here is take two quarterbacks, one very average and the other completely untested, and made them worse.

Derek Anderson looks as if he's never played the pro game and Brady Quinn is so robotic and mechanical in his approach that it's difficult to remember that he used to be able to make athletic plays when he was in college.

Daboll appears to be trying to establish a rushing attack but his play calling during each game is so scattershot that not even his own players can figure it out. Rathe r than view the Wildcat formation, for example, as a component piece to a broader attack, Daboll treats it like a gimmick and it shows.

As a corollary, Daboll treats Josh Cribbs like he's a gimmicky player, as if he's the reincarnation of Kordell Stewart.

It's unlikely that Daboll has ever had a player quite like Cribbs and that shows, too. By not figuring out any cohesive way to use him on offense, the only time Cribbs plays like he's not confused is when he's returning punts or kicks.

Finally, Lerner needs to go with his instinct and hire an experienced football executive and plant him on top of the pyramid, but only after first defining the franchise for himself. There is one proviso to all of this, assuming he does end up keeping Mangini: don't seek any input from Mangini on who this person should be or the role he should have. Indeed, the person Lerner chooses should make Mangini uncomfortable and sweat profusely.

Mangini carries himself with an odd sense of entitlement and job security when he's earned neither.

It's time that Mangini understand that he isn't the smartest person in the room, not even close.

As advice goes, it's really pretty simple stuff yet so elusive for Lerner. The overarching problem with Lerner all along is that he fundamentally hasn't put his imprint on this franchise.

Instead he's delegated to others these fundamentally non-delegable duties. He uses his fear of public speaking as a crutch when all it's really doing is masking who he is and what he stands for.

It's a mistake and always has been.

This is his chance to finally get it right. But it all starts with him. It always has.