For years, the Browns have needed a First Monday in January Guy.

The first Monday in January is normally the start of the offseason for perennial dregs like the Browns. It's the day when the postmortem begins. It's the day when the front office takes stock of what went wrong and starts formulating the initial steps to try and fix it.

It's also the day when the coach often gets fired.

Mike Holmgren was brought to Cleveland and paid a lot of Randy Lerner's money to be the man making the calls on the first Monday in January. To be the organizational guru who can identify what is wrong with his team and how to correct it.

Monday, he made his first big call, firing Eric Mangini after a second straight 5-11 season. It's a move that is at the same time defensible and questionable.

In a business driven by wins and losses, Mangini didn't improve. In the division, he didn't improve, leading the Browns to a 1-5 record for the second straight year. His team appeared poised for bigger and better things after a pair of impressive wins over the Saints and Patriots, then fell apart in the second half of the campaign, sustaining embarrassing losses to the Bills and Bengals, and punctuating the season with a 41-9 humiliation at the hands of the Steelers.

But the Browns played competitive football for all but the final game. Mangini got the most out of a very limited roster for the season's first three months. Injuries to Colt McCoy and Scott Fujita slicked the Browns' second-half slide.

This truly was a judgment call for Holmgren, and by his own admission during his afternoon press conference, he hadn't totally made up his mind on Mangini's fate until Monday morning.

"I didn't sleep very well (Sunday) night," Holmgren said during his press conference, as quoted on Cleveland.com. "I was up a fair amount of the night thinking about this, thinking what I might

have to do and trying to make the correct decision."

Mangini is a good coach. Not a great coach, but a good coach. Which is far more than we can say for any other Browns coach in the expansion era. The Browns might gain more from Mangini's replacement, or they might not. But they definitely lost something with his dismissal. They lost the coach who did the initial dirty work of taking the Browns from a circus of ineptitude to something resembling a competent, professional organization. And he took a lot of heat from the players and media to get there.

Mangini came in with the wrong idea about himself as a football guru in the mold of Bill Belichick. He botched the 2009 draft and alienated former GM George Kokinis. But when the time came to reform, Mangini swallowed his pride and became a team player with Holmgren.

He's a better coach than he was two years ago. His time in Cleveland made him a better coach. You could make a case that Mangini deserved a shot to see his vision for the Browns through to completion, maybe with a new offensive coordinator and a couple of new receivers.

That's what makes all of this more than your average bilge-water purging of NFL coaching flotsam. That's what makes this potentially a polarizing move by Holmgren.

Holmgren has placed himself on the hot seat by doing exactly what every one of us wanted him to do when he took the team president's job a year ago: put his stamp on the organization and make this a Holmgren team.

That's about to happen. Holmgren the football executive is about to build an entire franchise in his image. He plugged in his front office last year, and it yielded arguably the best free agent and draft class of the Browns' expansion era. Now we get to see if the former coach who has thrice tread a Super Bowl sideline has the right stuff to hire the best possible coach for this team.

But really, what is Holmgren's vision for the Browns' on-field product? It might still be murky, even to the man himself. Which, honestly, is a little disconcerting for those of us who want to see the most accomplished Browns executive since Ernie Accorsi move forward with a definitive plan for rescuing the franchise from the NFL's sewer.

It would be one thing if Holmgren were dead set on building the Browns around the West Coast offense and Bill Walsh football. That was never going to be Mangini. Sometimes, the pieces just don't fit. But according to Holmgren's comments on Monday, even that isn't an absolute. He says he wants the best candidates. He'll beat the shrubs looking for the best coaching candidates, no matter what corner of the football universe they come from.

"If I hire a coach, I'm going to hire a coach," he told reporters. "He's going to run what he runs, what he's comfortable with, what he knows. Will (the West Coast system) be a part of the consideration in the process? Absolutely, but I'm not going to interfere that way as the president"

Holmgren stated he won't return to the sidelines himself at this point, which eliminates the possibility that Holmgren was angling for the job all along. Apparently, he truly wants to build this team from the executive level.

So what does Holmgren want? The best possible people. That broad definition serves as Cleveland's guiding light for the time being. Maybe the coming weeks and months make the picture a little clearer. For now, we have a team president with respect-demanding credentials discarding a decent coach with room to improve for an undetermined better coach.

Holmgren has the hammer and chisel. He could sculpt a classical masterpiece to rival Michelangelo's "David," or he could scuplt a backyard garden gnome. Right now, this really could go either way.

Frankly, I was hoping for a little more from Holmgren. And I'm going to be hoping for a lot more in the coming months.