When Mark Shapiro agreed to a contract extension last week that binds him to the Indians organization until 2012, there were probably more than a few Cleveland fans that wanted the Indians' GM to undergo an immediate psychiatric evaluation. It would give him two decades with this organization, where he'll continue to battle with the "financial limitations of this market". Erik Cassano says Mark Shapiro knows exactly what he's doing though. And that despite what most would think ... the Indians GM job is one of the best of all in baseball.

When Mark Shapiro agreed to a contract extension last week that binds him to the Indians organization until 2012, there were probably more than a few Cleveland fans that wanted the Indians' GM to undergo an immediate psychiatric evaluation.

If Shapiro lasts the duration of his contract, he will have been bound by owner Larry Dolan's tight purse strings for 12 years. That's longer than the 10 years John Hart served as GM under the ostensibly richer Dick Jacobs.

Not only that, he will have been a member of the Indians organization for -- shockingly -- 20 years.

Any executive who commits 20 years of his professional life to the vortex of failure that is Cleveland sports has suspect judgment skills, the prevailing opinion says. Combine that with an ownership group whose spending habits require a GM to be more resourceful than MacGyver, and you'd have to wonder if Shapiro has spent too much time in a closed garage with his Mercedes idling.

We ask, is it really worth the trouble? Wouldn't Shapiro be better-served by taking his considerable talent to an organization that will really allow him to flex it? An organization that will allow Shapiro to hunt the big fish in free agency as opposed to settling for the oft-injured and washed-up?

Maybe Shapiro is nuts for staying in Cleveland for so long. Odds are far better than 50 percent he still won't have a World Series title, or even a pennant, on his GM resume by the time his contract is up. Heck, in the AL Central, getting to the playoffs would be a championship in of

itself.

But I'd venture to say Shapiro is as sharp as a tack, and knew exactly what he was doing when he agreed to stay in Cleveland for another five years.

The reason is simple: The Indians' GM gig is one of the best in baseball. You might not know it, or want to admit it, but among those in the inner sanctum of baseball executives, Shapiro is holding down a primo position.

The ability to toss money around in free agency is a sliver of what GMs value when it comes to their jobs. Sure, Shapiro can't hang with the Red Sox's Theo Epstein or the Yankees' Brian Cashman when it comes to slinging greenbacks and landing sexy names. Not even close.

But there is a lot of freedom Shapiro has that Epstein, Cashman and their big-market ilk don't have.

Epstein and Cashman are maintenance men. Actually, they're more like NASCAR crew chiefs. Their job is to spackle holes on the fly, change the tires, give their teams a quick splash of fuel and get them back out on the track.

There is no such thing as rebuilding in the world of the baseball titans. There is just win, win, win now.

Shapiro gets to be a CEO, a turnaround artist like you read about in Forbes, or -- if you were so inclined -- my very own employer, Smart Business . Six years ago, he got to sit down and plot a strategy. Since then, he's been allowed to execute it, revise it and execute the revisions.

Larry and Paul Dolan aren't in his hair, demanding this move or that, or usurping his authority at the bargaining table, as so often happened to Yankee executives when George Steinbrenner was younger and feistier. In fact, the Dolans are on the same page with Shapiro, valuing a well-stocked farm system above all else.

He has been allowed to re-stock the Indians farm system as he saw fit both during the 2002 tear down and last year's mini-fire sale. Nobody in the organization questions his competence or openly thinks they can do a better job than him.

In other words, Shapiro has been left alone to do his job with the help of his personally-selected assistants like Chris Antonetti and Neal Huntington. Words can't describe how important that is to a sports GM, who comes into contact with wannabe-GMs every day.

Shapiro knows what he's doing. Hart, his mentor and predecessor, left the Indians in 2001 for a bigger paycheck and bigger payroll with the Texas Rangers. It was a disaster. Hart had more money to spend, but he had a depleted farm system choking him from the bottom and an impatient owner in Tom Hicks choking him from above.

Hart was forced to overpay for whatever players would accept Hicks' money. To this day, uttering "Chan Ho Park" probably causes the hair on the back of Hart's neck to stand on end.

Money might be one of the most important tools in the GM trade, but it doesn't add up to a good job. Shapiro knows that. That's why it really wasn't that difficult to persuade him to stay put with the Indians.