It may not go down as one of the great questions of the universe and the answer may not actually matter all that much, but why is it that the Cleveland Indians can win late in the season with lesser players and not earlier when it matters more? That's a question on every Indians' fan mind, or at least the mind of every Indians' fan that hasn't forgotten that the team is still playing. Gary gives us his thoughts on the matter in his latest column.

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That's a question on every Indians' fan mind, or at least the mind of every Indians' fan that hasn't forgotten that the team is still playing. It also has to be near the top of the list of questions that Indians' owners Larry and Paul Dolan and Indians general manager Mark Shapiro have to be asking themselves as well.

For the Dolans and Shapiro, the question isn't academic. Getting to the heart of this conundrum will, as much as anything else, determine whether manager Eric Wedge needs to find a different coaching gig over the winter.

If you were Wedge's agent, you'd certainly use the team's 20-15 record since the All Star break as reason number 1 why Wedge needs to be retained. That argument is easily crafted. Wedge has taken a lineup that's been almost completely overhauled during the middle of the season and found a way to make a little chicken salad with it. The team as it exists today will be close to the team

that steps on the field next spring and thus, the logic goes, there's no reason to think that Wedge can't get the same results then that he's getting now.

Actually, there is a reason to think otherwise. But let's not get hung up in the weeds.

All the Indians' mini post-All Star surge has proven at best is that Wedge can't manage a team with lofty ambitions. It's not particularly relevant that the national media anointed the Indians as a contender going into the season as much as it's relevant that Wedge's bosses felt the same way. In response, Wedge ran another in a series of lousy spring trainings that did little to prepare the team for what was to come. Entering the season ill-prepared, Wedge's incessant tinkering and inability to set a lineup only contributed to the problem. As Wedge fiddled, the team began to collapse around itself as the losses mounted. It was only after the pressure and burden of expectations was lifted did the team finally relax. It doesn't sound like something you'd want to put on your resume.

That's the overview. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though. There are a number of fingers in this pie, some of which are those of the people asking the questions about Wedge in the first place.

Let's start with the Dolans. Dispensing with the argument about whether or not they've properly funded this team, it's enough to admit for these purposes that they sufficiently funded it for this season. The Indians entered the season with a payroll of around $81 million, according to the USA Today salary database. That put them in the top half of the league, although behind, well behind, both Detroit and Chicago.

Although the correlation between spending and success in baseball is undeniable, the Indians, at least this season, were in that comfortable middle ground where this season, at least for them, wouldn't be decided by a relative lack of funds.

Where the Dolans need to be held more accountable is in their abject faith in Shapiro. Certainly not publicly and unlikely privately, the Dolans haven't much questioned Shapiro and his approach until very recently. This has been unfortunate.

Shapiro isn't the sum total of all that ails but his history over the last several years has been dotted with enough mistakes and missed opportunities, if not outright red flags, that it's surprising he's not been held more accountable. This team has drafted poorly. Its free agent signings have been very spotty. Its connection with the fans has been at its convenience. Budget constraints are a factor, certainly, but other teams have done more with less. The Florida Marlin and Tampa Bay Rays come immediately to mind.

Shapiro also has acted as the mother-protector for Wedge even when the circumstances didn't warrant it. It's not as if Wedge's main flaws developed suddenly and unexpectedly. He's never been able to settle on a lineup and he's never run a particularly efficient spring training camp. His in-game decisions are often questionable. Yet it's apparent that these weren't of sufficient concern to Shapiro. If they had been perhaps those problems would have been fixed long ago.

Shapiro may have deserved the support of the Dolans and may still, but if the Dolans are going to be successful running this franchise on the cheap, they are going to have to do a better job of holding Shapiro accountable for the team's shortcomings. Blame Wedge as much as you want, and we'll get to him in a moment, but the days of blind faith in how this franchise is run on a day to day basis is the first step on the road to whatever recovery there may be.

Similarly, the days have long since passed for Shapiro to still consider himself joined at the hip with Wedge. For too long, Shapiro has treated Wedge like a long lost brother from another mother. When Shapiro had his last contract extended he in turn gave a similar extension to Wedge. It's as if they were still little boys on a camp out, cutting their index fingers, swearing allegiance to each other; blood

brothers.

This symbiotic relationship, somewhat the reverse of the relationship between Browns' head coach Eric Mangini and general manager George Kokinis, looks like one of those great ideas until it isn't. Unquestionably it's better for the manager and the general manager to be on the same page. But there's a world of difference between being on the same page and being of the same mind.

The problem with the Shapiro/Wedge dynamic is that it's all just yin and yin. Neither seems to challenge the other and no one is the better for it. The only thing harder to fathom right now than an Indians World Series victory is Shapiro and Wedge going toe to toe over anything.

Does anyone seriously think that Wedge, for example, ever went into Shapiro's office and said "we've got to do something about Jhonny Peralta" or Shapiro ever demanded Wedge in his office to find out why Grady Sizemore's plate discipline has declined each year instead of improved?

Instead, each does the other's bidding in an effort to keep the boat steady. Meanwhile neither noticed how much water the boat was taking on, at least until it was nearly too late.

As the Dolans have with Shapiro, it may be that Wedge deserves the support he's gotten from Shapiro. Maybe he deserves it still. But if he does it has to be under a much different paradigm. Wedge's shortcomings are too many and too obvious for Shapiro to continue to ignore.

The lesson of this season is that more than anything else it was an institutional failure. The Indians didn't suddenly get bad because Shapiro had an off year finding cheap talent. They didn't fail because Wedge suddenly got complacent. It's the little acts of negligence that occurred and went unnoticed for too long that

ultimately did this team in.

That's why if this team is ever going to get out of its interminable purgatory it has to look far beyond the fool's gold of a late season surge that still has left it one of the worst teams in the league. The road to recovery is long. It's impossible to navigate if you won't admit you're lost in the first place.