

Who's Minding the Gap?

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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There's a concept in the business world called gap analysis. It works like this. Say you need to reorganize a business unit or redesign a business process because it's become a bloated, inefficient version of its former competitive self. You can just start trying different things to see if that will make it better. In football terms, that's called the Cleveland Browns Approach. Usually it doesn't work. You could also take a more methodical, process-oriented approach. In football terms, that's called the Rest of the NFL Approach. That tends to work much better.

Assuming you follow the Rest of the NFL Approach, the first task is to do an "as is" analysis, which is exactly what the term suggests. During this phase you review, factually and unapologetically, the current state of what you're doing. You make no value judgments. You just take an honest, sometimes brutal assessment of what you currently do.

The next step is the "to be" phase which also is exactly what the term suggests. Having decided that a change is necessary, you undertake an assessment of what you want the reorganized or redesigned business unit or process to look like. You do this by benchmarking against your competitors. You try to find best practices that others are using. In short you meticulously design exactly what it is your business unit will look like as a more nimble, capable competitor.

The final step is to undergo a "gap analysis." This means you compare your "as is" work product with your "to be" ideas and figure out what are the gaps keeping you from getting where you are to where you want to be. If you're at all honest about the process, it should lead to some sobering conclusions and daunting tasks. But if you perform those tasks correctly, the gaps will close.

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To this point, the Cleveland Browns have mostly been shooting crooked in the dark. Not knowing where they really want to go, except in the most general of terms, they figure that any road will get them there. That's why there's been a series of coaches, personnel directors and players of all shapes, sizes and temperaments and yet as one season blends into another the franchise hasn't progressed in any discernible fashion.

I bring all this up because there's been much talk the last few days about the gaps between the Cleveland Browns and the rest of the teams in the AFC North or, for that matter, the rest of the good teams in the NFL. Josh Cribbs, who else, spurred it on by declaring in this week's post-game gripe that the gap between the Browns and the rest is huge.

Joe Thomas, on the other hand, took issue with the declaration, suggesting instead that it's all a matter of execution.

This isn't exactly an argument over nature vs. nurture, Lodge. Instead it's an outward manifestation of all the little disconnects between what's taking place in the front offices occupied by general manager Tom Heckert and club president Mike Holmgren and what's filtering down to the players.

Besides, there's no need to take sides between Cribbs and Thomas since they're both in essential agreement. The ability to execute is what differentiates minor and major talents. So yes, the Browns have a huge talent gap. How do we know? The players they have lack the ability to execute.

Never was this more clear than the debacle that was the Ravens game this past Sunday. It was no secret that the Ravens wanted to run the ball with Ray Rice and Ricky Williams. Even if the Ravens had tried to disguise it, which they didn't, the steady rain dictated that approach. And yet even knowing exactly what was coming and when, the Browns' defense was rendered powerless to stop it.

This was the result of talent gap. The Ravens' offensive line played bigger, stronger and faster. They executed their assignments with precision. The Browns' front 7, to a man less talented

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then their counterparts, could only absorb the blocks and respond only after the play had mostly passed them by. It's why the Ravens gained nearly 300 yards on the ground and why the Ravens could have gained 500 yards on the ground if that had been their wont.

When the Browns had the ball, it was the same situation, just in reverse. The Browns' offensive line, particularly the right side where most plays seem to be run, played smaller, weaker and slower than the Ravens' defensive line. They were often perfunctory in the execution of their assignments. Rarely were there even slivers of light through which Peyton Hillis could run.

When Colt McCoy had the ball, he was under near constant siege against a defensive line that was far better in its ability to apply pressure than the offensive line was in preventing it. And even when there was time, McCoy's receivers failed to execute on their main job assignment, catching the ball.

According to Mary Kay Cabot in Tuesday's Plain Dealer, the Browns' receivers lead the league in dropped passes with a staggering 35 of them. And that's without Braylon Edwards! If the offensive line isn't opening holes and the receivers aren't catching passes, then how exactly is a team supposed to score?

So what you had really on Sunday was an almost perfect visual documentation of a gap analysis with the Ravens representing a "to be" state, the Browns in the "as is" phase and all those very telling statistics, not to mention what you actually witnessed, separating the two.

It manifested itself in the plays the Ravens made routinely on both sides of the ball and the plays the Browns did not. It manifested itself in the visceral feel you got that the Ravens players seemed to just hit harder and cover better. It manifested itself in the records of two teams who only technically play in the same conference and league.

The fact that a gap exists is itself not the problem. There's always a gap unless you're the team at the top and even then there are all sorts of mini-gaps between various aspects of your operations and those other teams that do some tasks better than you.

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The issue is exactly what it will take to close the gap and that is the question that various iterations of Browns deep thinkers supposedly have been trying to solve with virtually no success. Former general manager Phil Savage often spoke about it in terms of the number of quality players it takes to be competitive. Eric Mangini, a de facto general manager, talked about it in terms of a mystical process. In the end they were just throwing stuff against the wall and hoping it would stick.

What really bothers the average fan still is that they're tired of that approach and are starting to think, based on the results they see each week, that this regime is more of the same.

It would help if someone on this Browns staff laid out much of a realistic vision on how those gaps are going to be closed. But Holmgren speaks sparingly and Heckert not at all. You can't tell exactly what gaps they see and what plans they have to close them. All your left to do is look for little clues and make assumptions that are probably wrong.

What I fear is that the Browns are reaching a critical mass with their fans, most of whom have proven they can take an incredible amount of abuse. What these fans need at the moment is a reason to believe that despite the numbing sameness each week there is a definite plan in place and it's being acted upon. Right now, that just doesn't appear to be the case.