

As an organization, the Indians seem to be at a crossroads. Mark Shapiro and his staff laid out a carefully-orchestrated plan in 2002, one centered on rebuilding what had become an atrophied farm system, signing the best young players to reasonable long-term contracts and augmenting the core the roster with value-based free signings and opportunistic trades. And it really hasn't worked. Erik Cassano says this organization needs some outside perspective, and calls for it in his latest column.



There are countless ways to build and run a successful organization, in sports, business or any other endeavor. The ways are limited only by the variety of talents and personalities that exist in managers and executives across the board.

I write for a business magazine at my day job, and I've talked to hundreds of CEOs about how they run their businesses. Some swear by their metrics. Some manage by feel. Some believe in consensus building. Some believe in majority rule. Some believe the buck stops at their desk.

There is no one right way to do this. But as many ways as there are to build an organization, there are as many ways for it to go wrong.

As an organization, the Indians seem to be at a crossroads. Mark Shapiro and his staff laid out a carefully-orchestrated plan in 2002, one centered on rebuilding what had become an atrophied farm system, signing the best young players to reasonable long-term contracts and augmenting the core the roster with value-based free signings and opportunistic trades. The object was to get the

most bang for the Dolans' buck as the Indians transitioned from the big-market fantasy land of the sellout-laden '90s to the budget-conscious, belt-tightened reality of the 2000s.

It worked, but only to a point. And "to a point" just hasn't been good enough to put the Tribe on a consistent winning track.

Midmarket and small market teams simply need to hit on a high percentage of their moves if they are to stay competitive with the big bankroll boys in New York, Boston, Los Angeles and Chicago. Big-market teams can outspend poor drafting and whiffs in the trade and free agent departments. Smaller market teams either hit on the moves they make, or they don't hit at all. There is no safety net, no duct tape to cover the damage at a later date.

And to that end, Shapiro's plan just hasn't worked how it has needed to work. He's hit on some moves, but not enough. The result is basically an unfinished product. The Indians have a small band of promising young players, but little surrounding it. They have a farm system that has some quality talent, but not much apparent star power. They develop some players, but many more seem to languish and not realize their full potential, or have brief stints as productive major leaguers before regressing.

The net result is a lack of organizational momentum, feeding a kind of malaise that seems to have settled over the entire franchise. From top to bottom, the Indians seem to be sleepwalking down a unclear path toward unspecified goals.

Higher-ups in the organization might quickly contend that the organizational goal is very clear: to build a World Series winner. That looks great on a mission statement plaque. But is that what really motivates the front office, coaches and players each day?

I'd guess not. And if you want to kill momentum in the world of business, multiple CEOs have told me that poorly defining your objectives is a great place to start. Want to turn your organization into a collection of automatons going through the motions of work each day? Neglect to focus them on a larger purpose.

That's the danger of the "grinder" mentality that so fascinates Shapiro and Eric Wedge. It's easy to understand the logic of not wanting your players to

get too high or too low over the course of a more than seven month journey from the first spring training game to the last game of the season. But in the rush to have players put on their hardhats and focus squarely on the task at hand, it's easy to go too far in the other direction.

You're asking guys to play a sport, not work on an assembly line. A certain level of passion and emotion is a good thing. If you don't have that, you have a group of uninspired, unmotivated employees who are just trying to get to the next game, and eventually to the end of the season so they can punch their time cards and go home.

This is baseball. If you play it for a living, you shouldn't be waiting for the 5 o'clock whistle to blow. But I fear that's the mentality that has grown up around the Indians. Too much Johnny Punchclock, not enough Ernie Banks.

Shapiro's mistakes in personnel management go hand in hand with the mental flat lining that has occurred on Wedge's watch. Wedge could probably do more with the players Shapiro gives him if he could inspire them to achieve more. But Shapiro too frequently hamstringing Wedge with washed-up bullpen arms, overmatched hitters and soft-tossing starting pitchers. Shapiro and Wedge might be eternally loyal to each other, but they're really not doing right by each other in the organizational hierarchy.

Having said all of that, there is still some good left in the Indians' organization. The club is not so off track that it can't be salvaged. But someone has to come in and do a thorough weeding of some of the negative undergrowth that is depriving the team of nutrients. But someone has to break the cycle.

The trouble is, I don't know if Shapiro and Co. can do it. I don't know if they're even willing to admit that there is a problem larger than injuries and a few guys having down years.

The Indians desperately need cross-pollination, whether it be in the front office or in the manager's chair. They need outside perspectives from coaches and executives who are not completely institutionalized by The Indian Way. They need strong-willed baseball minds from other, more successful organizations who are capable of coming in and telling Shapiro "You're wrong about this."

And Shapiro needs to give that person real power -- not just the cop-out title of "Special Assistant."

For now, "this," as it pertains to what Shapiro is doing wrong, will remain mostly undefined. The point is, the Indians desperately need a presence within the organization that thinks differently. Right now, I gather there isn't a ton of new thought-DNA being pumped into the front office or coaching staff. And that's what Shapiro needs -- outside influences. Even if it makes him uncomfortable.

I go back to my CEO interviews. Hiring people with different opinions, people who might challenge your methods, is one of the hardest things a leader can do. But if someone in Shapiro's shoes refuses to do that, their loyalty is ultimately to their process and plan, and not to their organization.

As the general manager, Shapiro is obligated to do what is best for the Indians. Not what is best for himself, Eric Wedge, Chris Antonetti, John Mirabelli, or even Larry and Paul

Dolan

-- though he answers to them. His first priority should be to making the Indians better. Period. Not making the Indians better by doing it his way, with only people loyal to his plan.

We're already seeing the results of that with a downward spiral that is worsening by the year, and a noose that is tightening around Shapiro's reputation as a GM by the week.