High-quality control in a mid-size business.

By William E. Wallace

ST. LOUIS

T he unveiling of the re-

turbid “Last Judgment” in the Sistine Chapel calls to mind

the phony image of Mi-

chelangelo, the lonely genius trapped between agony and

ecstasy, isolated on his back on a

scaffold, paintbrush in hand. In fact, he was on everybody else’s back.

This Renaissance artist, it turns out, resembled today’s successful business executive. Some 475 years ago, he was chief executive officer of a small to mid-size company — a kind of workshop — and, over time, report-
ded to demanding chairmen of the board: nine Popes.

His tastes were cultivated. He al-

ways traveled business class (by mule) or first class (by horse);
dressed fashionably in black, drank Trebbiano wine and ate Florentine ears.

New materials — including bank

records relating to his major Floren-
tine projects, and found in Florence and Pisa archives — attest to his preoccupation with infinitesimal de-
tail, like some C.E.O.’s. They illumi-
nate evidence already known to us

from nearly 2,000 letters, 660 draw-
ings and 360 personal and profession-

al memos.

Like his modern counterparts, the

entrepreneurial Michelangelo was

versatile: he dreamed up a church

facade, library and monastery, all in

Florence, for the city and its wealthi-
est executives, the Medicis.

For these projects, he personally

selected a work force of friends, asso-
ciates and trained professionals. He

imposed a flexible organization that

permitted talented individuals to find a place on one or more teams. He

encouraged creative competition and

initiative in design and execution. He

reprogrammed the hacker elite (marble carvers) so they could real-

ize his vision. A troubleshooter, he

made alterations and solved prob-
blems as they arose. He darted in and

out of the assembly line so daily, and

worked almost every Saturday and

Sunday.

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most holidays. His employees benefi-
ted from flexible hours, good pay and

job security — except when the deaths of his papal patrons interrupted

the cash flow.

The romantic myth that Michelan-
gelo worked by himself fits our notion of the lonely, self-sacrificing genius — conditions that presumably are necessary for creating art. Actually, he was never alone. He lived with two male assistants and always had a female housekeeper. Thirteen people helped him paint the Sistine ceiling; about 200 helped carve the marble tombs in the Medici Chapel in Flo-

rence, with its allegories of Day and

Night, Dawn and Dusk. And to build

the Laurentian Library in Florence, he supervised a crew of at least 200.

We know his helpes because he

recorded the names, days worked and

wages of every employee, every year. The new archival findings tell

us that most were friends and ac-

quaintances from boyhood — in fa-

miliar that he mostly called them by

nicknames. His payroll list lists sar-
naisances equivalent of Bert, Bob

and Biff — there was Berta, Bello, Boco

and Bondo, as well as the Fly, the Cat,

the Carrot, Oddball, Nero, Little Mouse, the Thief, the Turk, the Godfa-

thor and the Anti-Christ.

As a human resources officer, Mi-

chelangelo knew his personnel: Mi-

chele was unreliable and deceitful; Rubenio, a contemptible wretch;

Bernardino, a rascal, great soun-
dred, liar and thief; Piero, a fop who

loved fine clothes more than work

and flitted about Rome, in his velvet

shoes, chasing whores.

Michelangelo’s workers sometimes

disappointed him but he never fired

them. “One must have patience,” he

wrote. He paid his assistants well —

something like today’s upscale plumbers and carpenters (but his sal-

ary was 12 times theirs). He provided

hours for those with a long com-

mute (most walked an hour or more

to work) and despite the occasional

outburst he was genuinely fond of

them and vice-versa. He employed

many for 14, 20, 30 or more years;

this was remarkable, given the gener-

ally unreliable nature of labor and

average life expectancy of about 40.

His close ties with the staff in Flo-

rence insured labor stability and guar-

anteed quality control. But when

Francesco da Sangallo turned out

shoddy carving, Michelangelo docked

his weekly pay “because he did not abide by what he promised.”

The workshop’s organization was

more horizontal than pyramidal: Mi-

chelangelo was at the center, not the top. And while not efficient by today’s standards, it did promote versatility and the Renaissance equivalent of Total Quality Management.

In short, like Type A executives profiled in Fortune magazine, Mi-

chelangelo micromanaged, keeping tabs on all the pieces and his fingers in many pies. So many obligations, he said, “require a hundred eyes.”

Although he had no training or experience in archi-

tecture, when Mi-

chelangelo started constructing the most magnificent and expensive building in Florence he used marble blocks of a size and quantity unequalled in more than 1,000 years, from Alpine quarries that even today are virtually inaccessible, with a transport system of sleds and oxen that had to be organized and staffed, with equipment that was made and borrowed and sometimes defective, in weather that was often uncoopera-
tive and roundly cursed and with men who were handicapped but needed job retraining.

He selected and inspected all his materials; arranged for rope, tackle, and boats; bargained with carriers about fees, and made drawings for even the tiniest, seemingly most in-
significant detail, before turning the paper over to make calculations, count bushels of grain, draft a letter or compose poetry.

Yes, Michelangelo was a creative genius — and a savvy executive, a man equally at home in the mundane and the sublime. Like many entrepre-
noureurs, there were occasional flaws in his managerial style and personal relations, but he was notably suc-
cessful in eliciting the best, from him-

self and his co-workers.

Michelangelo died at nearly 90 in 1564, a wealthy land owner. In his lifetime, he delivered total customer satisfaction, and has been doing so ever since.