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TITLE: MANAGEMENT LEARNINGS FROM MUMBAI'S DABBAWALA COMMUNITY

HISTORY: Since 1890, Dressed in white outfit and traditional Gandhi Cap, Mumbai Army of 5,000 Dabbawalas fulfilling the hunger of almost 200,000 Mumbaikar with home-cooked food that is lug between home and office daily. For more than a century our team have been part of this grime -ridden metropolis-of-dreams.

About 125 years back, a Parsi banker wanted to have home cooked food in office and gave this responsibility to the first ever Dabbawala. Many people liked the idea and the demand for Dabba delivery soared. It was all informal and individual effort in the beginning, but visionary Mahadeo Havaji Bachche saw the opportunity and started the lunch delivery service in its present team-delivery format with 100 Dabbawalas.

A list of management lessons from the Dabbawalas:

The strength of dabbawalas is that they complete a large number of deliveries in a day. It is a process from which one can learn many management skills. Some of them are listed below.

Employees are an asset of dabbawalas

A place where employees are treated well is the place that gets the most amount of effort put in from their employees. Dabbawalas are very well known for how well they treat the people they work with.

The degree is just a sheet of paper if you have the capabilities to win hearts

It is not compulsory that if a person has a higher degree, he has a big heart. The dabbawalas may not be very well educated but they know their work more than anyone. They know how to communicate, and how to manage their time and other than that they are fully dedicated to the work they are doing.

Providing employees with a feeling of motivation and value

The dedication of the dabbawalas can be somewhat ascribed to the worth they put into the work they do. "Our dabbawalas view their work as love. They are thankful for their work, and to serve others by delivering food is akin to service to God," says a dabbawala . Therefore, everybody in Mumbai regards and appreciates the dabbawalas for their work.

A smile can make the food tastier

Food served with love has a different taste. Even if you are not hungry and someone with a loving smile asks you to eat something, you cannot resist having it. In the same way, the dabbawalas, despite working so hard in the scorching sun, always serve you with a prominent smile to make your meal more delicious.

It is not easy to be a dabbawala

Well, not everyone can be trusted with the food. The dabbawalas go through a tough training process and then a six-month trial. The dabbawala is not selected until he completely understands the motto of dabbawalas.

Try not to be excessively lean; build in buffers

Each dabbawala is fit for gathering up to 20 dabbas a day, yet this is extreme. Generally, in a gathering, all dabbawalas come together so that if a dabbawala is busy or unavailable, the others can redress. New dabbawalas are employed distinctly to replace a part or when there is an excessive number of new clients in an area.

Be a support system to other dabbawalas

There is nothing as competing against each other in the dabbawalas. No one has a designation, everyone is the boss. They are not bound by anything, as a result of which they give the best results for themselves and their co-workers.

Keep a level organization

Harvard Business School's contextual investigation noticed that the dabbawala association has developed into a hierarchical design to empower quick navigation.

Leave awful customers

They believe that one client should not make thousands suffer. In case a Mumbai homemaker is late with the dabba for more than one week, they are careful about not taking on that client again.

Management: A Self-Organized Democracy

The dabbawalas are essentially self-managed, handling hiring, logistics, pricing, and customer relations themselves. Each dabbawala negotiates prices with customers, ensuring long-term, trusting relationships. New members are trained on the job, and after a probationary period, they can buy into the business. Experienced workers serve as supervisors, overseeing various aspects of operations. The organization's committees address operational and organizational issues.

Process: Simplicity, Flexibility, and Rigor

The dabbawalas emphasize simplicity in their processes, using a basic symbol-based coding system on lunchboxes to manage deliveries. They maintain buffer capacity with extra workers who can fill in where needed. Cross-training is key to their flexibility. The adherence to processes and standards minimizes variations that could disrupt their operations.

Culture: A Strong Sense of Belonging

The dabbawalas' strong ties to their teams, shared identity, and homogeneity contribute to their success. Workers remain in their groups for their entire working lives, fostering deep connections. Their dedication to a simple mission — delivering food on time — creates a sense of purpose and unity.

A Self-Reinforcing System

The dabbawalas' success lies in the synergy between these pillars. For instance, their simple coding system enables a hub-and-spoke organization, reducing the need for centralized management. This holistic approach ensures that changes in one aspect consider the impact on the entire system.

In the corporate world, the dabbawalas' model offers valuable lessons for achieving extraordinary results with an ordinary workforce. Rather than relying solely on exceptional talent, organizations can align their organization, management, process, and culture to maximize performance. However, maintaining this harmony is an ongoing challenge, as exemplified by companies like Dell, which faced difficulties when market dynamics shifted.

Conclusion

The dabbawalas of Mumbai demonstrate that extraordinary results are attainable through a well-orchestrated system, even with an unexceptional workforce. Their story teaches us that success requires not only leadership but also a focus on designing and fine-tuning systems that empower employees to excel. As businesses strive for excellence in a changing world, they should remember the dabbawalas' key lesson: it's not just about hiring

stars but about creating a system that allows ordinary workers to achieve the extraordinary.