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Topic: Management learnings from dabbawalas and the vision ahead

The word "Dabbawala" in Hindi can be interpreted as "lunchbox carrier." The Mumbai Dabbawalas represent an extraordinary & exceptionally efficient system, operate in a decentralized manner, which has acquired international admiration because of its simplicity. The Mumbai Dabbawalas are individuals clad in traditional white attire and Gandhi caps, responsible for delivering wholesome home-cooked meals from residences to respective offices for Mumbaikars daily. With origins extending over a century, they have become an iconic embodiment of thriving city like Mumbai's dynamic culture. As they operate their food delivery service on four essential & unique pillars: organization, management, processes, and culture.

As per the Forbes magazine, the Dabbawalas holding & maintaining remarkable Six Sigma rating of 99.9999 in the early 2000s, indicating error ratio is 1 in 16 million which is a testament to unparalleled accuracy. Today Dabbawalas have become an integral part of the city's cultural tapestry, with their unwavering reliability, and strong community ethos. "The customer is always right" is a slogan that Dabbawalas have wholeheartedly embraced, as a positive customer relationship is a necessity for the survival of their business.

The vigor of dabbawalas is in their capacity to deliver vast number of deliveries every single day. The whole process serves as an imperative learning of management techniques & skills such as:-

1. Not forgetting the core purpose & mission
2. Time management – following the strict adherence to schedules, precision
3. Employees are a valuable assets – imparting them a sense of worth
4. Effective communication & also enabling to foster a culture of collaboration.
5. Simplicity – Don't overcomplicated things, as they largely depends on the people they serve. What really the customer wants (customer-centric), as they are the backbone & critical components driving the entire operation.
6. Self-discipline
7. Being a support network for fellow dabbawalas
8. Unwavering dedication to customer satisfaction
9. Following unique colour-coding system – the success of this method is operational efficiency by a series of distinct colour marks & particular set of numbers to segregate the dabbas to avoid mixup errors.

The Dabbawala's profound spiritual connection, unique work ethic hold a competitive edge. Their deep-seated reasons to perceive the act of catering to the customer as a respect for a higher authority.

Much like many other well-established organizations, even startup companies face their own set of challenges & risks in a rapidly changing world, the dabbawalas are no exception. In any business, inevitable risks will arise irrespective of which methodology is being employed, such risks can be mitigated but not entirely eliminated.

Challenges encountered by Dabbawalas & strategies for future sustainability

1. The Dabbawalas continue to be majorly reliant on public transportation particularly local trains & bicycles. Since 2017, air-conditioned local trains were introduced by Indian Railways. That led to alteration to the local train schedule disrupting the workflow & placing in a difficult situation for dabbawalas as AC local train doesn't have separate luggage compartment which can lead to delay & discrepancies in tiffin delivery.

It's not feasible for them to board the substantial amount of baggage.

Solution: The railway authorities should contemplate on the provision of a separate luggage compartment in AC local trains.

2. Dabbawalas still continue to rely predominantly on conventional methods, with minimal or no technology which might cause a hurdle in the long run. There is a significant rise of food delivery apps like Zomato, Swiggy & Uber Eats leading to changing consumer behaviour. Especially younger generations opting for these apps hereby diminishing the appeal & demand for the traditional home-cooked meals delivered by dabbawalas. As western lifestyles & fast food become more prevalent among the youth.

Solution: By adopting to technology gradually, the Dabbawalas could develop their own apps & website to highlight, promote the value of home-cooked meals, & their significance to younger generations. It can even be promoted by collaborating with Nutritionists and Fitness Experts, Teaming up with various health & wellness programs.

Launching different campaigns that focuses on the cultural heritage & nutritional benefits of home-cooked meals could resonate with them.

Furthermore, with the help of social media platforms it can be used to showcase customer testimonials, behind-the-scenes content, & stories of

the dabbawalas could help build a strong, relatable brand that appeals younger generations.

3. The absence of succession planning as younger individuals are reluctant to pursue this profession it could be due to physically demanding nature, relatively low income.

Solution: To attract young talents, this can be achieved by possibly offering them the opportunity of part-time work positions such as administrative or customer service related tasks.

Also showing success stories of young dabbawalas or those who have progressed within the system can inspire others to consider.

Progressing with the advancement of technology into the dabbawala system can make the job less physically demanding & more appealing to tech-savvy youth.

Conducting awareness programs to showcase the community impact, cultural importance associated with being a dabbawala can attract interest from younger generations.

4. The Covid-19 pandemic's impact remains profoundly significant to dabbawala community are resilient despite struggles to make ends meet as majority of individuals now prefer remote work or work-from-home, reducing the demand for lunchbox deliveries.

Solution: Dabbawalas can expand their delivery services not only to office workers but also to provide family-sized meals to households. Adapting to remote work trends. They can also broaden their services by including the delivery of groceries, household essentials or medicines, providing additional income sources during times of reduced lunchbox demand.

5. In today's fast paced world to sustain from economic downturns & inflation which is rising costs of living in Mumbai have put financial pressure on the dabbawalas as it can strain their financial stability.

Solution: By diversifying revenue streams they can expand their service offerings which was mentioned above will help in attracting new customer base & increase in income level.

To achieve it, providing training in areas such as financial management, technology to improve the quality and efficiency of their services would be beneficial.

Hence, tackling these challenges is essential for their continued success & sustainability in an ever-evolving environment.