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Management Learning's from Dabbawala and the Vision Ahead

A Dabbawala, sometimes known as tiffinwalas are essentially delivery men, who form a vast lunchbox delivery and return system, ferrying home-cooked hot lunches, known as tiffins for India's working population. Since 1890, dressed in white outfit and traditional Gandhi Cap, Mumbai Army of 5000 Dabbawalas are fulfilling the hunger of almost 200,000 Mumbaikars daily.

It all started when a Parsi banker gave the responsibility of fulfilling his urge to have home cooked food in office to the first ever Dabbawala about 125 years ago. Eventually the demand for Dabba delivery soared. Initially it was just an informal and individual effort, but visionary Mahadeo Havaji Bachche saw it as an opportunity and started the lunch delivery service in its present team-delivery format with 100 Dabbawalas.

'Work is worship', 'Serving people is serving God', 'Annadan is Mahadan', 'Time is money', 'Unity is power' are some of the slogans that Mumbai Dabbawalas believe in. It is also believed that the descendants of Dabbawalas were the warriors in the army of Shivaji Maharaj. Dabbawalas are Marathas from Varkari sect & are from remote villages around Mumbai.

These Dabbawalas operate in group of 25-30, headed by a group leader. There are more than one group operating in one segment. As far as individual Dabbawala's workload is concerned, each Dabbawala is required to collect from home, deliver at office and return empty tiffins to home, 40 tiffins each. Average earning of each Dabbawala is Rs.15000 per month.

Mumbai Dabbawalas achieve Six Sigma accuracy in their performance (99.999999) i.e. the error rate is 1 in 16 million transactions. They use zero % fuel, zero % modern technology, zero % investment, zero % disputes but 100% customer satisfaction. They only use local trains for their operations.

The Dabbawalas emphasize simplicity in their processes, using a basic symbol-based coding system on lunchboxes to manage deliveries. The coding system created by their forefather is still prominent in 21st century. Initially it was simple colour coding but now since Mumbai is widely spread metro with 3 local train routes, our coding has also evolved into alpha numeric characters.

Mumbai's Dabbawala's don't just carry meals. They stand for discipline and punctuality in the city of dreams. The core strength of Dabbawalas is that they complete a large number of deliveries in a day. Additionally, teamwork, honesty, discipline, ownership, time management, low cost, customer satisfaction, service commitment, process consistency, etc. also contributes to their strengths.

Dabbawalas are essentially self-managed, handling hiring, logistics, pricing, and customer relations themselves. It is a process from which one can learn many management skills. These Dabbawalas are very well known for how well they treat the people they work with, how they communicate, how they manage their time and how dedicated they are towards their work. They might not be very well educated, but when it comes to their work, they know it more than anyone else. Dabbawalas stand as a strong support for each other and do not believe in competing amongst themselves, which helps them to give the best results for themselves and their co-workers.

Dabbawalas got a lot of name, fame and publicity but there was no significant change in their lives. They are facing challenges as the market undergoes a transformation. For example, need to advance their skills, like learning to speak English, embracing technology, etc. Other challenges faced by them include floods, railways strikes, etc.

However, the major problem faced by them was that they do not have an income proof which invites numerous other problems such as no credits available, no bank account, no insurance security, no mediclaim facility, no pension plan, children of Dabbawalas cannot pursue higher education, no access to bank loans such as housing loans, personal loans, credit cards, education loan, etc.

Therefore, in order to overcome these problems faced by the Dabbawalas, Dabbawala Enterprise Pvt. Ltd. was incorporated on 7th September, 2017. The main objective of this company is the economic and financial benefit of Dabbawalas. It is a commercial company of Dabbawalas working for their economic welfare and financial inclusion and safety. Dabbawalas work as contractors in this company. Mr. Sandeep S. Gaikar, Mr. Sunil P. Gavande and Mr. Sharad G. More constitute the Board of Directors.

Dabbawala Enterprise Pvt. Ltd. helped the Dabbawalas with opening of bank account, issue of payment slip (which served as their income proof), filing of TDS certificate – Form 16, filing of income tax return, interest free smart

phones, 10 lakh insurance, 1 lakh mediclaim policy for whole family, free clothing, etc.

The future plans of this enterprise includes NPS Pension plans, Interest free laptops, less interest home loans, educational loan for children and gold and silver reward for Dabbawalas. It also aims to launch food products, its own factory and to become a Multinational Food Company.

The world famous Dabbawala system took its worst hit due to COVID-19 which resulted in thousands of Dabbawalas retreating to their original homes in rural locations, many turned to subsistence farming on small plots, worked as daily wage workers, while some turned to odd jobs such as gardeners, security guards, deliverymen, cooks, etc.

Despite many initiatives by the Dabbawalas to compensate the losses incurred during Covid pandemic, they have nonetheless seen a decline in the demand for dabbas. There can be various reasons behind it, some of which are listed. First, the use of online food delivery platforms such as Zomato, Swiggy, etc. has skyrocketed post covid, severely affecting the sales of Dabbawalas. Dabbawalas are finding a hard time competing with these online food delivery platforms. Second, these days, a lot of workplaces provide their employees with good canteen facilities, complimentary lunches, food cards, food vouchers, etc. This has in turn reduced the need to carry tiffins (dabbas), significantly affecting the business of Dabbawalas. Third, after the pandemic, numerous companies have begun offering the option to work from home to their employees. As a result, employees now have their lunch at home, eliminating the need of packed lunches (dabbas), which has had a considerable impact on the Dabbawala's business. Fourth, many homemakers have started setting up stalls near offices to sell their home-made food. Because of easy and quick access to home-made food, many employees prefer to have their lunches from these stalls, which significantly hampers the business of Dabbawalas.

Following are some of the solutions that I could think of, considering the above stated problems faced by the Dabbawalas. First and the foremost thing is that they should digitize majority of their processes, including taking orders online, online tracking, online payment, etc. by developing their own mobile application, website, etc. Further, they should also make an effort to collaborate with online food delivery platforms like Zomato, Swiggy, and others. They should try and convince them to include 'Dabbas from Dabbawalas' as an option

on their platform. This will encourage the users of Zomato and Swiggy to explore this option, which might increase the demand for Dabbawalas. This option will help in giving a boost to Dabbawala sales without hampering their individuality. It might also lead to successful marketing of Dabbawalas.

I strongly believe that Dabbawalas should expand their business by entering a new segment, called 'Dabbawalas Kitchen', wherein they can employ several homemakers to help with preparation of food as well as Dabbas. Along with delivering home-cooked food from houses to offices, they can also deliver food prepared by Dabbawalas kitchen. When collaborating with Zomato and Swiggy, there can be a further bifurcation of the option 'Dabbas from Dabbawalas' namely 'My kitchen' (home-cooked food delivery from user's home to user's location) and 'Dabbawalas kitchen' (delivery from Dabbawalas kitchen to user's location). Additionally, they can collaborate with different corporates to set up complementary lunches and distribute Dabbawalas food vouchers/food cards, which are provided to employees by corporates. Further, they can open cloud kitchens/small outlets of 'Dabbawalas Kitchen' close to corporate areas, railway and metro stations, airports, corporate canteens, etc.

Even though the Mumbai Dabbawalas face different challenges, but with judicious adjustments to their four pillars, they may continue to achieve amazing results. The Dabbawalas show that an organization doesn't need extraordinary talent to achieve outstanding performance with the right system.

"The Dabbawalas are the unsung heroes of Mumbai's food delivery system, showcasing an unparalleled model of operational precision and teamwork that defies the odds."