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Management Learnings From Dabbawala

Since 1890, Dressed in white outfit and traditional Gandhi Cap, Mumbai Army of 5,000 Dabbawalas fulfilling the hunger of almost 200,000 Mumbaikars with home-cooked food that is lug between home and office daily. For more than a century, the dabbawala team has been a 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.

As the city grew, the demand for Dabba delivery grew too. 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, the coding has also evolved into alpha numeric characters.

The word 'dabbawala' is a composite word, made from 'dabba', meaning box, and 'wallah', loosely translated as carrier. Dabbawalas, sometimes known as *tiffin wallahs*, are essentially delivery men, who form a vast lunchbox delivery and return system, ferrying home- and restaurant-cooked hot lunches, known as *tiffins*, to India's working population. Tiffin boxes are stacked aluminum cylinders, each containing; a rice dish at the bottom, followed by a daal, or curried vegetable dish and accompanied by a roti or chapati to mop up the homemade delights. Some even contain a dessert, topping off their hearty meal.

The boxes are collected from households in the late-morning, where a wife or mother has spent the morning preparing the home-cooked meal (India still largely adheres to gendered roles). From there, they are loaded onto a cart and transported to their destinations using predominantly bicycles and railways. The route of each tiffin is denoted using a hand-painted labeling system of symbols and colours, indicating the collection address, the train station it is destined for, and the final address of the recipient. After lunchtime, the whole system is reversed and the tiffins are returned to the households they were collected from in the morning.

This system means that every worker, regardless of their palette, preferences, or dietary requirements, will be satisfied with what they know and love from home. Instead of ordering a takeaway or eating out, every customer can have a warm, fresh and homemade meal. Professional meal suppliers in Mumbai, where the system is most popular, also pay dabbawalas to ferry ready-cooked lunch boxes back and forth between central kitchens and customers.

How does the System work ?

Tiffins are collected from homes between 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. every day and taken by bicycle or foot to the local train station. At various rail stations along the way, the crates of tiffins are hauled onto platforms and resorted for area distribution. From here, a final relay of dabbawalas deliver the tiffins to their destined bellies. A single tiffin could change hands as many as three or four times during its daily journey.

Dabbawalas organise themselves into groups of 25, with each group holding autonomy over their own locality. Every member is responsible for collecting the same 35 – 40 tiffins every single day, a cargo that can weigh up to 70kg. The same is true on the other end of the rail line; where dabbawalas pick up the resorted tiffins and cycle them through the final leg of their journey, to their

hungry customer. This “assembly line”-like system ensures that the margin of error is kept minimal, with one estimate claiming an error rate of 1 in 6 million.

Once consumed, the whole process moves into reverse and the empty boxes return home by 6:00p.m., ready to do it all over again the following day. Each dabbawala is entrusted to pick up the empty tiffin box and return it to its home. This is even preferred to each worker taking the box back on their evening commute, with full faith in the dabbawalas ability to coordinate every trip accurately. There have even been accounts that many customers respect and trust the dabbawala system so much, they would rather send their salary home in a tiffin than carry it home themselves!

The dabbawalas’ precise timing is fundamental to the success of the system. Dabbawalas operate within very small margins of time, allowing only 40 seconds to load boxes onto trains at major stops, and just 20 seconds at interim stops. This strict schedule is engrained into each dabbawala, something few 21st century logistics companies are able to do.

What is the Dabbawala Coding System ?

As many dabbawalas are of limited literacy, a simple coding system comprised of colours, numbers, and letters indicate the collection point, train to be taken, and the final destination of the tiffin. This information is conveyed through markings on the lid of the box.

A large, bold number in the centre indicates the neighborhood the box is to be delivered to. A group of characters on the side of the lid show the office building and floor number the box is destined for. The colour and shape of a third symbol designates the station of origin. Full addresses are not provided on the tiffin lid.

To return the empty tiffin back to the appropriate house from the designated station of origin relies instead on the dabbawala’s memory. Households will

supply small bags for the tiffin boxes, which vary in appearance. From this information, and his own memory, the dabbawala can safely ferry his cargo of 30 tiffins through the last leg of their journey, to the original owner, with virtually 100% accuracy.

Astounding Accuracy of the Dabbawalas !

The dabbawala delivery service system, thriving in one of the most chaotic megacities in the world, has become an institution in India, and is a fascination of the world. It has also become the envy of some of the largest corporations on the planet, most notably FedEx, due to their jaw-dropping level of accuracy.

The reported figure of 1 mistake per 6 million deliveries comes from a 1998 Forbes interview with Raghunath Medge, the president of the Mumbai Tiffinmen's Association, who said, "the 5,000 Dabbawalas make a mistake only about once every two months". This was later extrapolated by Forbes to mean the dabbawalas make just one error in every 6 million deliveries, leading to the award of a 6 Sigma performance rating by Forbes in 2002 (a prestigious recognition awarded in quality assurance when accuracy is 99.9999999% or more).

In a city that is rapidly changing both socially and technologically, the dabbawalas are a testament to how far local knowledge, interpersonal relationships and hard work can go. The industrious staff deliver an estimated 200,000+ meals a day, every day, throughout the monsoon season and into the long hot Indian summers.

What does the future look like for the Dabbawalas ?

As India's economic continues to sky-rocket, the question of whether and how long for dabbawalas will continue to exist has crossed more than a few minds. The emerging middle-class, as well as younger generations, are increasingly

choosing to eat out and order take-away through the rising number of food delivery apps available in Mumbai.

This might appear to threaten the popularity of the dabbawala service, as younger generations increasingly rely on technology to source their meals from delivery startups like Scootsy. However, the dabbawalas find their saving grace in its low price point. Customers using the dabbawala network only pay 450Rs (£4.95) a month for their home-cooked deliveries, making it impossible for modern competitors entering the market to set up their own logistical infrastructure and remain competitive. The result is modern companies, such as juice cleanse-delivery startup Raw Pressery, are completely reliant on the existing dabbawala infrastructure to distribute their product to health-conscious customers, if they want to remain competitive.

While the dabbawala network itself doesn't appear to be in danger of disappearing, they might be forced to alter the nature of their business if they are to remain relevant. Rather than exclusively supplying home-cooked meals, they could be simultaneously forced and enticed by the prospect of higher wages, to also work as contractors for the emerging food delivery businesses in order to meet the growing demand in the city.

Management Learnings derived from The Dabbawala System !

Employees as Assets: The dabbawalas prioritize the well-being of their employees, recognizing that treating them with respect and care directly contributes to the dedication and effort they put into their work. This mutual respect fosters a strong sense of community and commitment among the workers.

Capabilities Over Degrees: The dabbawalas demonstrate that practical skills, experience, and emotional intelligence often outweigh formal education. Their

success comes from their deep understanding of their job, their ability to communicate effectively, and their time management skills.

Motivation and Value: The dabbawalas are motivated by a sense of purpose. They view their work as a form of service, which enhances their dedication and satisfaction. This sense of value is not only intrinsic but also recognized and appreciated by the larger community in Mumbai.

Service with a Smile: The personal touch the dabbawalas add to their service, such as delivering meals with a smile, elevates the entire experience for their customers. This simple act of kindness can make a significant difference in how their service is perceived.

Rigor and Trust: Becoming a dabbawala is not easy. The rigorous training and trial periods ensure that only those who truly understand the ethos and responsibilities of the role are selected. This process builds trust, both within the organization and with their customers.

Team Support and Buffering: The dabbawalas have a system of mutual support. They work together to ensure that if one person is unavailable or overwhelmed, others can step in to maintain the quality and reliability of the service. This collaborative approach ensures efficiency and reduces the risk of service disruptions.

No Hierarchy, Just Cooperation: The dabbawalas operate in a flat organizational structure where everyone is equal. This lack of hierarchy fosters a collaborative environment where everyone is responsible for their own work and supports their peers without the pressure of competition.

Customer Relations: The dabbawalas understand the importance of maintaining good customer relations but also know when to let go of customers who are consistently problematic. This approach helps them maintain the overall efficiency and reliability of their service.

The dabbawalas' approach to work is a great example of how a strong, value-driven culture can lead to success, even without the traditional markers of corporate structure or formal education.

How can an MBA student get inspired from the Dabbawalas?

First off, it's all about the Teamwork and Collaboration. The dabbawalas work in a flat structure where everyone supports each other, and they achieve amazing results by focusing on teamwork rather than individual competition. As we go ahead with our MBA journey, we need to understand the importance of building strong relationships with our peers. Working well with others often leads to better outcomes rather than doing it alone.

We need to consider their Customer-Centric Approach. Dabbawalas put a huge emphasis on keeping their customers happy by delivering food on time, every day. They know how important their service is to their customers' lives. As we take on projects or when we start our careers in the future, the customer needs and wants need to be given the utmost importance. The understanding of what drives the customer satisfaction will help us make better decisions in the future.

The dabbawalas also show us the power of simplicity and efficiency. They've built an incredibly reliable delivery system without relying on fancy technology—just a well-organized process. This is a reminder that in our work, it's often better to keep things simple and focus on efficiency. Don't overcomplicate things when a straightforward approach can get the job done just as well, if not better.

Resilience and adaptability are also key takeaways. The dabbawalas navigate the chaos of Mumbai with remarkable accuracy, adapting to challenges as they come. This is something one can apply to their studies and career too. Be ready to face obstacles, and stay flexible so we can adjust our strategies when things

don't go as planned. The business world is always changing, and the ability to adapt is a crucial skill.

Another important lesson is the value of purpose-driven work. The dabbawalas see their job as a service to society, which motivates them to give their best every day. Whether it's in our studies or career, we need to find a purpose that goes beyond just making money. When the work is aligned with something that truly matters to us, we may find it much more fulfilling.

Leadership without titles is another inspiring concept from the dabbawalas. In their system, leadership isn't about having a title—it's about taking responsibility and helping others succeed. As we move forward in our MBA and beyond, we need to think deeply upon how we can lead by example and constantly support those who are around us. True leadership is about lifting others up, not just advancing ourselves.

Cultural awareness and communication are also crucial. The dabbawalas excel in working with people from diverse backgrounds, which is essential in a city as diverse as Mumbai. As an MBA student, it's important to develop strong cultural awareness and communication skills. In today's global business environment, understanding and respecting diversity can give us a real edge.

Finally, the dabbawalas teach us the importance of operational excellence. They've perfected their delivery system with a level of efficiency that's hard to beat, showing how critical flawless execution is in logistics and management. As we take on projects or enter the workforce, we need to strive for excellence in everything we do. We need to learn about process improvement and quality management, and apply those principles to ensure that the assigned work is always top-notch.

What can be the Future Vision for the Mumbai Dabbawalas?

- They need to embrace Technology. While maintaining their core operational principles, the dabbawalas could integrate technology to enhance tracking, communication, and coordination. This could involve the use of GPS for real-time tracking of deliveries, mobile apps for customers to interact with the service, and digital payment systems.
- They need to introduce Training and Development methods. Continue to invest in training programs for new dabbawalas while also offering ongoing professional development. This could include digital literacy and customer service training, ensuring the workforce remains skilled and adaptable.
- They can also explore various Expansion possibilities and opportunities. The dabbawalas could explore expanding their service offerings beyond just lunchbox deliveries. This could include delivering groceries, medicines, or even offering courier services. Diversification could help them tap into new markets while leveraging their existing network and expertise. Establish partnerships with companies and organizations to offer specialized delivery services. This could include working with corporate offices to deliver meals or partnering with e-commerce platforms for last-mile delivery.
- The Accountability of Environmental and Social responsibility. Adopt eco-friendly practices, such as using bicycles or electric vehicles for deliveries, reducing plastic usage, and promoting reusable containers. The dabbawalas could also lead initiatives to minimize food waste by redistributing leftover meals to those in need. Strengthen their role in the community by engaging in social initiatives, such as educational programs for children, health awareness campaigns, and support for underprivileged communities. This would reinforce their image as a socially responsible organization.
- Preserve and promote the cultural heritage and identity of the dabbawalas. This could include documenting their history, sharing their stories through

digital platforms, and engaging with educational institutions to teach future generations about their unique model. Seek greater recognition for their contributions to Mumbai's social and economic fabric. This could involve working with the government to secure support and advocacy for their work, ensuring their model is protected and celebrated.

- Continuously improve the customer experience by incorporating feedback and adapting to changing customer preferences. This could involve personalized services, flexible delivery options, and loyalty programs to retain and attract customers. Explore expanding their services to other cities or regions with similar urban environments. This could be achieved by replicating their model in other parts of India or even internationally, where similar needs exist.
- Develop strategies to cope with unexpected challenges, such as pandemics, economic downturns, or changes in urban infrastructure. This could include building financial reserves, diversifying revenue streams, and fostering a culture of innovation and adaptability.

In this highly technologically advanced time, the Mumbai Dabbawalas are working tirelessly without the use of Technology which is the need of the hour of the 21st century. They have a world class supply chain, despite the fact that the dabbawalas don't even know what it means. Most of the people working with them are semi-literate but still they possess the ability to read the tiffin code correctly and deliver it at the right place and also at the right time. Their attitude of competitive collaboration is equally unusual, particularly in India. Their excellent sense of deep commitment, sense of work ethics and unparalleled time management system are best in place.