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15th August 2024

Management Learnings from Dabbawala and Vision Ahead.

Jai Bharat! I am EK59EX12. No, I am not a daughter of Elon Musk or any tech software. I am Dabba from Mumbai. Today, I will tell you all about my incredible journey. As you are surprised by my name, I promise you there is a lot more that will astonish you. So, like all of you, I also have family and friends. My mother fed me delicious food that she prepared with love. I hold it fresh and serve it to my dearest father, a hardworking bank employee. I could achieve this every day only because of my dearest friend, Mr Sunil Gavande, who works as a Mumbai Dabbawala. Unlike me, there are about 2,00,000 dabba; we represent more than just a meal; we symbolise the connection between home and work, bridging the gap and bringing a piece of home to the workplace. For many workers, particularly those who work far from their homes, We are not just nourishment but a personal touch from home.

Many of you might wonder what I am doing here at the Management Institute, why I am invited here, and what the importance of my journey is to you. The simple answer is that, daily, I have witnessed a remarkable example of errorless and honest management by dabbawalla while getting delivered. This journey, filled with learnings and insights, is not just a testament to the power of effective management, but also a source of inspiration and guidance for many students in their management endeavours.

Before we start, let's dive into how it began. Shree Hon. Mahadu Havaji Bache, though he was educated only up to class 2, but he was a man of dedication, values, commitment, and business ethics. He started the Dabbawala system with a handful of 35 Dabbawalas in 1890. (So now the famous quote from Dabbawalla: “Hum angrezon ke Jamane ke Jailor to nahi but Dabawala hai”.) He was a migrant farmer from remote village around Mumbai who worked and settled in Mumbai as Dabbawalas. Initially, most of his colleagues were Marathas of the Varkari sect from the remote villages around Mumbai. They believe in great philosophy, like Work is worship, Serving people is serving God, Annadanis Mahadan, Time is money, and Unity is Power. The belief comes from the legacy of descendants of the Dabbawalas, the warriors in the army of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

We have grown up as a family of 5000 dabbawalas and 200000 dabbas until 2024. 85% of the dabbawalla are “thumbs up.” Still, my Partners are so efficient that they delivered me and my friends (Here It Dabba) with an Error Rate of 1 in 16

million transactions. So, without any application, they got a Six Sigma performance (99.999999). Isn't it adorable that without any technology, my 5000 partners' dabbawalla handles 400000 transactions (in terms of Dabba delivery) in a single day without any error? Even during those days, some technology fails to achieve this error rate. So, what makes this system work so efficiently? It's simple management skills. Let's discuss it with some facts.

Operation:

The work of Dabbawalla mainly focused on four pillars: efficiency, time management, coordination, and culture. Dabbawallas operate in groups of 25 – 30, headed by a group leader called Mukundhams. There is more than one group in one segment. Even the Mukundhams and other high-ups work. It is like Everyone is a shareholder in this unregulated organization. This organisation has one astonishing fact that it recorded. There is a “no strike” record as each one is a shareholder. This working principle can be an efficient manpower utilization tool if we can build a business around it.

Supply Chain:

To Deliver freshly cooked food from home to office dabbawalla, use zero Fuel, Zero Modern technology, Zero Investment and Zero Dispute. Still, they can manage 100 % Customer Satisfaction. This could be possible because of utilising the best available resources as efficiently as possible. They use the lifeline of Mumbai, i.e. Mumbai Local trains, to travel fast and cost-effectively. They have separate reserved compartments offered to them by the government. They use bicycles or hand-pull carts to reach the station or from the station to the office. So they spent almost zero on fuel. We are almost dependent on smartphone technology, but Dabawalla has developed its own innovative technology, i.e., the Coding system. It started from different colours of threads from cotton waste gathered from thrown away the waste of tailors to mark 7 Iceland. Now, they have developed the Alpha-Numeric Code. Here, I will disclose the meaning of my name. You will be surprised to know that each Alphabet and number has a meaning, as my name is EK59EX12.



E: Code for Dabbawala/Street at the residential station.

K: Residential station Kalyan.

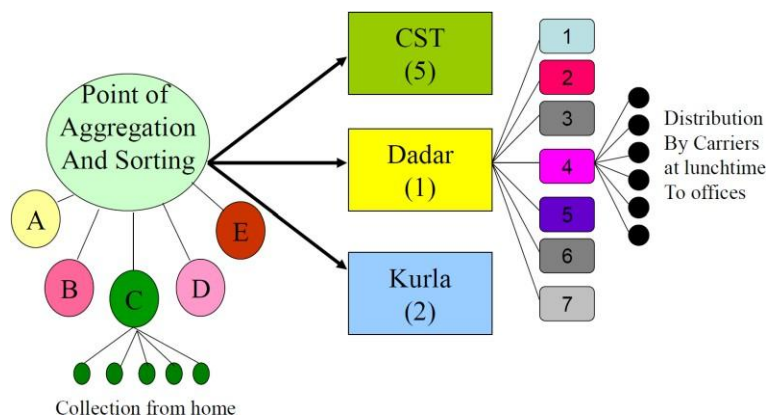
5: Code for destination Station eg. CST station.

9: Code for Dabbawallas at Destination

EX: Express Towers (building name)

12: Floor no in the building.

Every morning, the Dabbawala collects the dabbas at sharp times and rushes towards the station, where aggregation and sorting are allowed. This is the point where we will witness the cooperation between the dabbawalla. They are so fast and accurate. They arrange the dabbas for three different stations: Dadar, CST, and Kurla. Then, they reach the other end, where they are sorted according to the point of destination. From there, the distribution starts.



Human Resource :

Each dabbawala collects nearly 40 Tiffins (the maximum load they can carry) and delivers them to the office again; they have those 40 empty tiffins delivered back to the home. They start early in the morning, as delivery needs to be accomplished in 3 hours. Despite this hectic task and the lack of an organized work environment, Dabawala established a way of celebrating their work. Morning travel starts with the melodious bhajan. After lunchtime, sitting together with a colleague on the footpath of Mumbai and returning journey full of chats, exchanging experiences and learning, and cracking some jokes. This all makes their workplace lovable to them. This could be a learning point for many employees who don't love their workplace.

Finance:

Each Dabbawala charges the customer around Rs 500 to 700 monthly for their service. The standard pricing system depends on weight, distance, and space. So, if we calculate the business's Annual turnover, it is approximately 90 Crore. $[5000 * 12 * 15,000 = 90,00,00,000]$. Each Dabbawala earns about 15,000 Rs per

month. Also, some are fortunate enough to receive a bonus during the Diwali festival as a one-month salary.

I witnessed the daily schedule for Mr Sunil Gavande and his team. Their routine process is as follows.

8:00 AM - 9:30 AM (Location : Kalyan)

This time period is utilized to collect Dabbas from different places around Kalyan. Dabbawalas collect dabbas from different resources, such as homes, hotels, messes, etc., and bring them to Kalyan Station. The traffic system Red Light, no entry, etc., do not apply to them. Now, these collected Dabbas are sorted according to destination. So wherever there is a Dabba, There is a Dabbawala.

Dabba sorting at Kalyan station

9:42 AM - 10:55 AM (Location: in train)

This time period is actually the journey time. The Dabbawalas load the wooden crates filled with tiffins onto the luggage or goods compartment in the train. Generally, they choose to occupy the last compartment of the train.

Unloading And Sorting At Destination CSMT Station

11.15 AM – 12:30 PM (CSMT area)

The tiffin boxes are delivered to the customer. The tiffin box was placed in the office. Some customers collected it themselves.

12:30 PM – 1:30 PM (Dabbawala Lunch Time)

Dabbawalas carry their food with them. Area-wise, we sit together and have lunch. They have a special philosophy to believe in, i.e., the family that eats together stays together.

1:30 PM – 2:15 PM (At All Destination Stations)

Here begins the collection process: The Dabbawalas have to pick up the Dabbas from the offices where they were delivered almost an hour ago. The return journey by train where the group finally meets up after the day's routine of dispatching and collecting from various destination offices

2.43M – 4:15 PM

Usually, since it is more of a pleasant journey compared to the earlier part of the day, the Dabbawalas lighten up the moment with joking around, and singing. There is no cause for tension or worry as the customer had lunch. Even if the return journey is delayed a little bit, there is no problem.

4.30 – 5:30 pm (At Kalyan Station)

This is the stage where the final sorting and dispatch take place. The group meets up at origin station and they finally sort out the tiffins as per the origin area and the empty Dabba is delivered at the respective residence. The actual address of the residence is not mentioned on the Dabba – it is remembered by the Dabbawalas.

Key Management Learnings

1. Operational Efficiency with Minimal Resources:

The Dabbawalas operate with minimal technological resources, relying instead on a colour-coded system of symbols and numbers. This shows the importance of simplicity in processes and the effective use of available resources to maximize efficiency.

2. Employee Empowerment and Ownership:

Dabbawalas are self-employed and part of a cooperative. This structure gives them a sense of ownership, leading to high levels of motivation and dedication. Empowering employees and making them stakeholders in the company can lead to greater commitment and performance.

3. Precision and Consistency:

Despite the complexity of their operations, the Dabbawalas have achieved a Six Sigma level of accuracy (99.999999 accuracy). This highlights the importance of consistency and attention to detail in service delivery, even in challenging environments.

4. Customer-Centric Approach:

The system is built around the customers' needs, ensuring daily timely and accurate delivery. This customer-first mindset is crucial for any business aiming to build long-term relationships and trust.

5. Strong Organizational Culture:

The Dabbawala system is grounded in a strong work ethic and a mutual respect and discipline culture. This culture ensures that every member is aligned with the organization's goals, demonstrating the importance of a shared vision and values in achieving organizational success.

6. Adaptability and Resilience:

The system has withstood various challenges over the decades, including economic changes and the introduction of new technologies. Adapting and remaining resilient in the face of change is vital for long-term sustainability.

7. Effective Communication:

Despite being a largely illiterate workforce, the Dabbawalas have developed an effective communication system that ensures smooth operations. This underscores the importance of clear and simple communication methods within any organization.

8. Social Responsibility:

The Dabbawala system also reflects a deep sense of social responsibility, as many workers see their job as a service to society. Embedding social responsibility into a business model can enhance reputation and customer loyalty.

The Dabbawala system is a remarkable example of efficient, customer-centric management. Its lessons in simplicity, consistency, and human-centric operations are timeless and offer a blueprint for businesses seeking to thrive in an increasingly complex world. As we look to the future, incorporating these principles into modern management practices can lead to sustainable success and continued innovation.