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“Management Learning’s from Dabbawala”

In Bombay, a Dabba is a steel tiffin box with a width of approximately 15 cm and a height of 30 cm, that people carry to their offices from home. The ones who are occupied with gathering, sorting, and moving these dabbas between homes and workplaces are known as the dabbawalas.

Lakhs of Mumbaikars depend upon these men for their daily office meals. Mumbaikar dabbawalas are so reliable that they have never neglected or missed delivering the right Dabba to its rightful owner. Their superior management skills have gathered attention from all across the globe.

Any reasonable person would agree that Dabbawalas are the lifesavers of Mumbai. Every day, several individuals residing in Mumbai travel to their workplaces, starting from one area of the city, then onto the next, while battling the gridlocks, crowded trains, and other transport challenges.

Meanwhile, respective homemakers start to prepare wholesome meals to be served by lunchtime to their husbands. The motto of Dabbawalas is to deliver the tiffin box at a fixed hour. At lunchtime in Mumbai, dabbawalas flood the streets. These bicycle riding delivery men transport freshly made, home-cooked food to thousands of office workers across the city. In Mumbai, the glistening engine room of a modern India, the dabbawala is more than a simple delivery man. Inside his tiffin boxes he carries authentic dishes made from recipes stretching back generations. At the moment, there are at least 5,000 active dabbawalas. They are part of a well-organised corporation that provides several job opportunities.

The Varkari people of Maharashtra constitute a large number of the dabbawalas. It is a community united by common interests and strong bonds. 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. They are humble people. they don't know any theories nor have they learnt any strategy, still they share their experiences and learnings which they have gained from this legacy of 134 years ago a gentleman named Mahadeo Havaji Bachche started the dabbawala service in 1890, with a fleet of 100 men, which has grown today to a fleet of 5000 men for which they are honoured as “Management Gurus”.

There are inscribed management lessons in each and every step within there delivery system. The Dabbawalas have perfected their manual supply chain through meticulous time management, a unique coding system, and synchronized operations. They work on four basic pillars i.e. Efficiency, Time management, Coordination, and culture” are perfectly aligned and mutually reinforcing. The

basic pointer of Mumbai dabbawalas is their Coding System: One of the most remarkable features of the dabbawala system is its coding method. It's a mix of colours , numbers, and alphabets that denote various aspects like source and destination, ensuring each tiffin reaches its rightful owner. Human-powered: The entire process is manually powered.

The learning for them is that 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. On average, each dabbawala can carry a weight of up to 130 to 150 pounds. The workforce includes dabbawalas as old as 75 years who take pride in their ability to support themselves with their hard work. “No excuses” is their motto and this is surely something we must learn from them. Dabbawala are semi literate people. Thus the coding system which they follow must be simple. They follow a simple hand written codes and colors to identify whose Dabba it is, which station is that to be carried, and which building is it to be delivered.

The world famous Mumbai Dabbawala system took its worst hit due to COVID. What with the long 2020 lockdown and a shorter one later these poor people had no work. To top it, office-goers “work from home” severely hit them. Now, with schools opening, they hope to get back their old business volume. About half of their business comes from supply to school kids.

This 5,000 plus work force suffered in strength what with some of the men taking up alternative jobs like vegetable selling, hawking, delivery jobs or security men positions. Some of them are still at their home towns.

This 134 old business is yet to fully recover. Right now it is still around 50% of the old volume only. Until the WFH goes away completely, it will not see its former glory. For all their excellence and efficiency, a typical dabbawala earns just 15K per month.

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.

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 Manish. Therefore, everybody in Mumbai regards and appreciates the dabbawalas for their work.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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.

9. 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.

10. Build your organisation around people

Much of the dabbawala organisation's success is due to their human resource system, in the way they hire, develop, manage and reward people, says Stefan Thomke, William Barclay Harding Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. "It's an organisation built around people, not around technology."

11. Don't be too lean, build in buffers

"Each dabbawala is capable of collecting up to 20 dabbas a day – but this is the maximum. Usually, in a group, each dabbawala will collect less so that if a dabbawala is sick the others can compensate. New dabbawalas are hired only to replace a member or when there are too many new customers in an area,"

Conclusion

Many individuals believe that Mumbai dabbawalas are caterers. However, they are not food caterers. They are not caterers; they are delivery people who carry lunch boxes from homes to workplaces before lunch break. The specific recipients of respective Dabbas enjoy healthy and wholesome home-cooked meals delivered by the Dabbawalas. Furthermore, when individuals finish the lunch box contents, the empty lunch boxes are returned in the evening to their rightful owners at the same time daily.