

Name: Bhargavi Kolhe

Graduation: BBA

Present Educational Qualification: FY PGDM-Marketing

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Name: Bhargavi Kolhe Date:15 Aug 2024

Management Learning's from Dabbawala

We have heard people saying that Mumbai is a city that does not stop. But similarly, an army of men in the same town does not get tired or stop. Who are they?

They are Mumbai Dabbawalas, also known as Dabbawalas.

If you visit Mumbai, you are bound to notice the Mumbai Dabbawalas. You may not realize this, but the Mumbai Dabbawala is an essential part of the life of Mumbai.

Dabbawalas deliver around 2,00,000 meals daily and have been doing this for 130 years. Within 4 hours, they provide home-cooked meals to offices daily and do all this without using any technology.

Let us look at the Mumbai Dabbawala case study that will help you understand Dabbawala better.

The Invention of Mumbai Dabbawala

Founded in 1890, Mumbai Dabbawalas are the men dressed in traditional white outfits with Gandhi caps delivering home-cooked food to Mumbaikar from home to office daily.

They are a strong army of nearly 5,000 people who ensure that 2,00,000 people get their lunch on time at their offices.

Their work is so efficient that many famous personalities like Richard Bradstone and Prince Charles have visited them.

Moreover, these men in white have given lectures at different business schools. Therefore, they are six sigma compatible.

The service was born out of sheer need.

With so many people belonging to different communities reaching the city of dreams and no fast-food culture being that popular back then, there was a shortage of an adequate food delivery system.

While there was a rising demand, there was a supply of illiterate workers who had traveled to the city after their agriculture business failed to ensure sustenance at home.

With no education to work as clerks in the homes of Britishers but with enough energy to embark on any hard work, the idea of delivering home-cooked food was born.

Thus was the launch of the “Dabba Delivery System” in Mumbai.

How did the Mumbai Dabbawala Emerge?

Nearly 125 years ago, a Parsi banker working in Fort Branch wanted to have home-cooked food in his office. So he appointed a young man who belonged from Gurgaon to get his lunch from his home every afternoon.

It is how the job of 1st Dabbawala emerged.

[10:05 am, 15/8/2024] Bhargavi: The Mumbai dabbawalla price was nearly two annas at that time.

Soon, the business started picking up and gaining popularity because of the visionary work of Mahadeo Havaji Bacche, who considered this a golden opportunity and decided to grow it as a business.

What makes Dabbawala exceptional?

The dabbawalas have a fantastic service record. Each day they deliver more than 1,30,000 lunchboxes all over Mumbai, the fourth most populous city in the world.

Case Study of World Famous Mumbai Dabbawala

It means nearly 2,60,000 transactions being done in almost 6 hours every day, six days a week, and 52 weeks a year, without a single mistake.

Surprisingly, the dabbawalas have achieved that level of performance at a low cost, eco-friendly manner, without using any digital or IT platform or even mobile phones.

A study conducted by the Harvard Business School rated it “Six Sigma,” which means that the dabbawalas made less than 3.4 errors per million transactions.

With almost 2,00,000 deliveries six days a week, less than 212 missing or delayed Dabbas in a year.

You must be thinking, how can a poorly educated, decentralized team perform amazingly without errors in such a challenging environment?

The answer is a lesson for those companies who want to grow their business in the market.

The way the Mumbai tiffin wala works is an inspiration for all the organizations that want to grow. Companies that cannot afford to appoint stars depend on ordinary people for support.

The success of dabbawalas proves that with the right system and hardworking workers, we can achieve extraordinary results in no time.

Mumbai Dabbawalas employs around 5,000 people, many of whom have had little education or reading knowledge, but how do they keep the orders intact.

First, let's see how Mumbai Dabbawalas operate.

How do Mumbai Dabbawalas work?

The Dabbawalas run their food delivery service on four fundamental pillars.

These are the organization, management process, and culture.

All these four pillars are correctly aligned and mutually supporting. It is uncommon to see such coordination in the corporate world.

[10:05 am, 15/8/2024] Bhargavi: The Mumbai Suburban Railway, one of the most complex, vast, and mainly used urban commuter lines worldwide, plays a vital role in the Dabbawalas' operations.

Its basic layout requires delivery people with cycles and handcarts to travel between the railway stations and customers' offices and homes.

Every day, a Dabba reaches its destination after passing through several hands. In the morning, a dabbawalla picks it up from the customer's home and goes to the nearest railway station. Then, it is sorted and put on a wooden cart as per its destination.

Once it reaches the nearest station, it is sorted and assigned to another dabbawalla, who delivers it to the office before lunchtime. Once lunchtime is

over, the process runs the other way around, and the Dabba reaches the customer's home.

They use a trick to avoid confusion about which Dabba (the Indian Lunchbox) belongs to. They follow a "coding system." The lids of the dabbas are labeled with numbers, letters, and symbols indicating where they came and where they should be delivered.

The Mumbai Dabbawalas are famous for their punctuality. Their mission statement since the day they started operation has been "Always deliver on time."

A supervisory mechanism

The railway system sets the rhythm and pace of delivery. The regular schedule determines the time to complete a task and the time allotted.

Dabbawalas have just 40 seconds to load the crates of Dabbas on a train at essential stations and just 20 seconds at interval stops.

Management

The Dabbawalas manage themselves concerning logistics, hiring, retention, and customer acquisition.

First, however, governing committees fix guidelines for costs, considering factors like the distance between a customer's house and office and the distance between the office and the nearest railway station.

It helps them operate the service efficiently and keep charges low and the quality high.

Every Dabbawala is an entrepreneur responsible for negotiating prices with his clients. As Dabbawalas own their relationships with clients and tend to work in a similar location for several years, those relationships are usually trustworthy and long-term.

Process

For the Dabbawalas, having the proper procedure signifies much more than just implementing effective workflows. It also involves everything in the organization, including how information is collected, using built-in buffers, and strictly following the standards.

SWOT Analysis

Strength

Teamwork, honesty, and discipline

Ownership, time management

Low cost, customer satisfaction

A service commitment, process consistency

Weakness

It depends on Mumbai's local train service

Restricted access to education limits

Opportunities

Have a tie-up with caterers to serve varieties of food

Expanding to other cities

Threat

Flexible timing

During high alerts in the city, Dabbawalas face a lot of issues

Awards & Recognition

Shri. Varkari Prabhodhan Mahasmati Dindi Sohala

Invitation from CII for conference arranged in Bangalore

Documentaries made by UTV, BBC, ZEE TV, and MTV

World record in time management

How COVID-19 affected the Dabbawalas

The COVID-19 Pandemic has dealt a cruel blow to the men in white. Thousands of dabbawalas retreated to their original homes in rural locations as the virus raged across Mumbai, a city of over 20 million people, crippling the century-old food supply chain.

Some of them were surviving on state rations and charities. They neither had electricity nor mobile connectivity in their homes.

Till now, the government did not give permission for the dabbawalas to travel in local trains, which makes it difficult for them to reach their final destinations.

Growth of Dabbawalas

However, the world of Dabbawalas is challenging, showing the spirit and grit of Mumbai, a city with millions of people from different parts of the world.

Many dabbawalas have had to overcome challenges like floods and railway strikes. Also, they have had to advance their skills in recent times, like learning to speak English and embracing technology.

In October 2020, an official website for the dabbawalas, digitaldabbawala.com, was launched. It is an official website that includes details of all the delivery organizations.

In November 2020, they launched a Dabbawala app to make food delivery accessible and uncomplicated. The app helps you find food and order food from where you are.

You type an address, and the app tells you the restaurants that can deliver to your area. Also, you can search restaurants by cuisine, menu, and name.

Once you find what you want, you can place your order online without extra charges. The app also offers access to coupons, special deals, and a customer care team with 24/7 assistance.

Soon, the deliverymen started growing their services from delivering lunchboxes to delivery of digital services like electronic registration of marriages and property.

Customers can now place their lunch orders through the website. In addition, they can choose between a monthly or annual subscription for payment.

The dabbawalas partner with 14 local restaurants to deliver food to clients. Recently, they have been encouraging customers to order directly from the hotels and receive nearly 25% discount and free home delivery.

In August 2021, the dabbawalas launched their digital operation known as Central Kitchen, which lets customers place orders for a wide variety of food for delivery.

[10:05 am, 15/8/2024] Bhargavi: The idea behind these new creativities is to think outside the box and to expand the Mumbai Dabbawalas business, starting from lunch delivery to a wide range of other services that will help to protect their source of income and trade after the Pandemic is over.

The men in white continue to deliver lunch and protect the future of the world's oldest and most respected Mumbai dabbawalla system.

The men in white will still be delivering lunch, though, safeguarding the future of one of the world's oldest and most respected food delivery systems.

The dabbawalas show that an organization doesn't need extraordinary talent to achieve outstanding performance with the right system.

In today's modern age, when we are addicted to the latest technologies, the example of Mumbai Dabbawalas shows that sometimes the best plan is the "simplest."