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Mumbai Dabbawalas: Delivering a piece of home

Oh, the infamous dabbawalas of Mumbai! Are the Dabbawalas, known to deliver fresh, homecooked food to the people working for the heavy corporates of Mumbai struggling to keep their work front and running today? one might say- they managed to continue this beautifully for 134 years with their astonishing model, why would they struggle now? Or ever? Covid-19 happened. Large companies opted for work from home model for their employees but dabbawalas stayed resilient and continued their work even when such a major comet hit them.

They never went to management school but yet have created a life-changing and ecstatic delivery model! The intricate details and the thought process that went in the creating the system have a huge learning for management students to take.

In these changing times, corporates are going back to a 5-day in-office work week. With that, we have also seen a significant change in the way people travel to work every day in Mumbai. New day, New metro! Yes, the Mumbai metro! they're quickly replacing the Mumbai local trains. Some people also prefer to take a combination of the two.

They corporate employees have shifted to metro for their daily commute, can the dabbawalas too? Sure, it is not the most economical mode but is one of the better, luxurious and efficient ways of delivering the dabbas.

For example- there is an astounding number of offices in the Malad mindspace area of Mumbai. Lower Malad is the station that connects this area through the yellow line and red line of the MMRDA mahametro. There are many such areas in Andheri east too. A number of metro lines are still in the pipeline and are expected to start in a span of not more than 5 years. These lines will bring majority of the city closer. The metro map of Mumbai will soon look a lot like Delhi's.

A well connected and accessible city is all a commuter needs.

It may or may not be a viable option for the dabbawalas but is an adaptable alternative to local trains. How can they make it a sustainable alternative?

Here's a few ways to turn it into a profitable and efficient model-

1. Increasing the monthly delivery fees by 30%
2. Tie up with Mumbai Metro
3. Pitch for a separate compartment in the metros- just like the ones in local trains

By this, the dabbawala service can be made accessible in not only one but about 6-7 metropolitan cities.

Some of them would Kolkata, Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Chennai and many more! All of the above mentioned cities are equipped with a good network of Metros and abundant of corporate employees. But here, there's a catch to this. The folks working in these cities are mostly not locals. They are techies who have migrated from their hometowns to work in these cities to have a better lifestyle and earn good money. A friend of mine lives in Bengaluru and works there as an IT specialist is happy with everywhere around the city but his Job. They're deprived of home cooked meals. This is where dabbawalas can come in and make a difference! Providing them with home cooked food while they work hard in offices can be life changing. An initiative that dabbawalas can take is preparing meals and delivering those in offices. End to end system which can provide healthy and delicious meals at cheaper rates than food delivery giants like swiggy and Zomato is a great idea. A monthly, quarterly or half yearly subscription model can be followed. This could turn out to be a billion dollar idea! This will not only result in profitable and sustainable business model for dabbawalas but will also solve 1 of the 100 problems that these folks face everyday. "what should I order today?", "oh wow! there's pizza at a discounted rate! But no, I shouldn't be eating so much of unhealthy food every day. All that gymming will go to waste if I continue to eat junk food daily" These are some

thoughts that these employees face on a day to day basis.

As far as the management part is concerned, I'm sure the dabbawala team will handle it well. They've done it for many many years and will surely come up with a new and unique system for their new venture.

Management Learning's from Dabbawalla and the Vision Ahead

The dabbawallas of Mumbai offer valuable lessons for management students through their highly effective lunch delivery system. Their operation is a prime example of how efficiency and consistency can be achieved without relying on complex technology. They use a simple, low-tech system to handle thousands of lunchboxes daily with remarkable accuracy, proving that sometimes the best solutions are the simplest ones. One of their key strengths is their ability to work well together.

The dabbawallas rely on strong teamwork and clear communication to ensure that lunchboxes are delivered on time and to the right people. This highlights the importance of having a well-coordinated team and understanding the needs of customers to keep them satisfied.

The dabbawallas also manage to keep costs low by focusing on what they do best and avoiding unnecessary expenses. This shows that effective management involves keeping operations streamlined and avoiding waste. Their success in scaling up and adapting to changes while maintaining high efficiency underscores the value of having a flexible approach that can handle growth and unforeseen problems.

Additionally, the dabbawallas are able to deal with challenges effectively and maintain a deep understanding of local cultural practices. This demonstrates that being aware of and integrating local cultural aspects into business practices can enhance success. Their decentralized structure, where different groups operate with a high degree of autonomy but work towards a common goal, highlights the benefits of decentralization in managing complex operations.