

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT & MANAGEMENT

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MANAGEMENT LESSONS FROM DABBAWALA

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ABSTRACT

Despite the current emphasis on high technology for solving complex business logistics issues, a group of largely illiterate Indian entrepreneurs known as dabbawalas has been coordinating the delivery of home-cooked lunches to thousands of Indian office workers for over a century. Using Six Sigma principles to improve their operations, the dabbawalas have capitalized on the high demand among Indians in Mumbai for food prepared in their home villages. For an up-front investment of roughly 5,000 Rupees, a dabbawala can earn an average of 5,000-6,000 Rupees per month. Each dabbawala donates a portion of his earnings to their member association, which invests the funds in community projects and low-interest loans. Known for its ingenious use of simple symbols to coordinate thousands of daily deliveries, the dabba system represents a classic example of using a base-of-the-pyramid approach to benefit low-income workers and high-income earners alike.

KEYWORDS

Six Sigma, Supply Chain Management, Porter's model, SWOT analysis, Technology.

INTRODUCTION

A dabbawala is a person in Mumbai, India, whose job is carrying and delivering freshly-made food from home in lunch boxes to office workers. They are formally known as MTBSA (Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association), but most people refer to them as the dabbawalas. The dabbawalas originated when India was under British rule. Since many British people who came to India did not like the local food, a service was set up to bring lunch to their offices straight from their home. The 100-odd dabbas (or lunch boxes) of those days were carried around in horse-drawn trams and delivered in the Fort area, which housed important offices. Today, businessmen in modern Mumbai use this service and have become the main customers of the dabbawalas. In fact, the 5,000-strong workforce (there are a handful of women) is so well-known that Prince Charles paid them a visit during his recent trip to India. Several academic institutions regularly invite the dabbawalas' representatives for discussion, and to complement and enhance their academic content. At times, businesses find it useful to illustrate the application of how such a system uses Six Sigma principles to improve its operations.

THE ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE AND WORKING STYLE

The Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers' Charity Trust (NMTBSCT) encompasses a very flat structure with three levels, the Governing Council, the Mukadams and the Dabbawalas. They are an association of 5,000 people. An executive committee of thirteen permanent members is at the highest level of the NMTBSCT, and is responsible for defining and fine-tuning the overall dabba transport system in Mumbai. A second tier constitutes about 800 mukadams, who are the group leaders in charge of a team of five or ten dabbawalas. They supervise the tiffin route until the final delivery. The mukadam participates in the recruitment of new dabbawalas, assessing their suitability by taking into consideration both their reputation and their shared origins with other members of the association. They also manage relations with customers, making preliminary agreements for deliveries, and administer monthly subscriptions (at a cost of about 120 rupees per month).

The delivery system is based on a code whose observance is enforced by the mukadam, who also oversees any disputes that may arise among various dabbawala groups as well as having the more difficult task of enhancing network competitiveness to improve earnings.

The rest of the organisation is made up of the dabbawalas themselves, the members of the association (Fig 1). Each of the approximately 120 groups working in Mumbai territory is independent of all the others. Each group is a "Strategic Business Unit" and has to increase its customer base in order to generate the dabbawalas' wages.

FIG. 1: ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE OF DABBAWALA



A dabbawala’s earnings derive in part from the ability of each group to attract more customers into their network but also partly from the role played by an individual dabbawala in that network. Those who have just joined the association and have not purchased a mukadam line have a fixed basic wage that may vary according to the group’s revenue (from 2,500 to about 4,000 rupees a month). A mukadam supervising a group earns on the basis of how many tiffins his men can deliver; if he supervises various groups, who deliver tiffins in various parts of the territory, his earnings may be higher (about 6,000–7,000 rupees a month). To become a mukadam, an ordinary dabbawala has to buy a customer line being auctioned off, which occurs when a mukadam decides to retire and sells off their lines because their children are not interested in taking it over.

THE DELIVERY PROCESS

The dabbawala starts work at about eight-thirty in the morning, when he cycles or walks to pick up dabbas from the door of the “customer-supplier”, usually whoever does the cooking(Fig 2) . Time is of the essence in this process, because if one of the two parties is running late, the subsequent schedule fails. On average, each dabbawala is responsible for collecting thirty to thirty-five dabbas, the number depending on personal ability to memorise customer addresses and the physical strength for carrying the tiffin baskets. One NMTBCT dabbawala describes his day, and the efforts made to deliver his tiffin on time After this initial collection stage, the containers are taken to the nearest station by bicycle or in wooden baskets. Here a second group of dabbawalas, from the same line, takes the previously collected dabbas and loads them onto the trains. Although there is no formal agreement with the railways, the goods compartment at the head of the train is left for the dabbawalas or people carrying bulky goods. The biggest difficulties are the crowded stations and trains, which always make it problematic to move the heavy baskets among people trying to board the trains. Dabbas have to be loaded very quickly, in the thirty seconds the train stops on the platform. After this second stage, all the precious lunches are ready to move on to their destinations. If the trip is very long and includes a line change, the dabbawala in charge of the final delivery takes his own dabbas to a collection and sorting point. There are several strategic nodes near railway stations that serve as main centres for final sorting. At this stage, the role of the mukadam becomes essential for efficient coordination of the delivery network to ensure that no dabba is lost or routed to a wrong destination. The third stage is the final delivery: from the strategic collection point the cooked lunch is taken to the place of work of the “receiver-customer” for about 12.30 pm. The tension gradually eases and the dabbawalas can rest, eat their lunch and, lastly, prepare to make the journey back, following a circular route that begins and ends in the same way every day of the week except Sunday.

FIG. 2: PROCESS FLOW OF DELIVERY SYSTEM



THE CODING SYSTEM

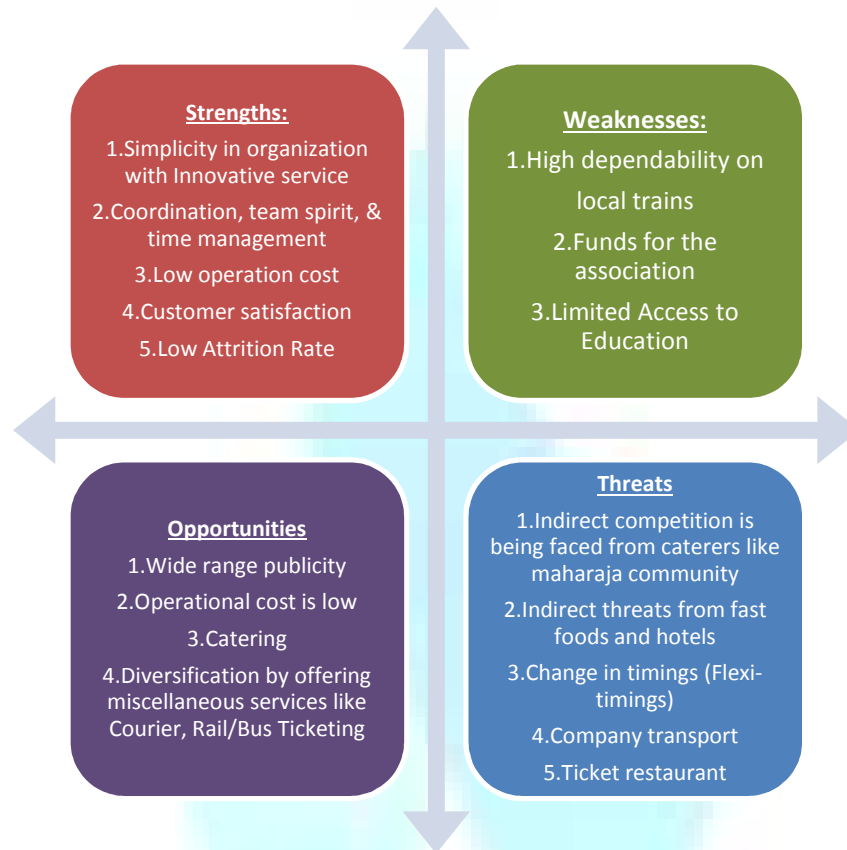
A system like this could not exist without a code for identification of the dabbas. The containers change hands several times during the day, so the group must be able to recognise them or they may be lost along the way. Most dabbawalas are completely illiterate or barely able to read and write, so tiffin delivery relies on the use of identification systems to ensure successful delivery. These systems are an important factor in network development and basically comprise four or

five symbols of different colours painted on the containers(Fig 3). Nevertheless, they do not share the same style due to the dabbawala association’s characteristics, which gives each group the freedom to manage its work independently.

SWOT ANALYSIS

SWOT analysis is employed to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.It involves specifying the objectives of the business venture or project and identifying the internal and external factors that are favorable and unfavorable to achieving that objective (Fig 3).

FIG. 3: SWOT ANALYSIS



PORTER’S FIVE FORCES MODEL

Porter’s theories (Fig 4), which are the basis for classical management principles, define the scope and nature of competition a company faces to attain leadership. Surprisingly, the dabbawalas are following these very principles in spite of their ignorance of the same.

FIG. 4: PORTER’S FIVE FORCES MODEL



I. THREAT OF NEW ENTRANTS

According to Porter, the threat new entrants is dangerous to any organisation as it can take away the market share the organisation enjoys.Started in 1880, the experience curve of the 125-year-old dabbawalla service serves as a huge entry barrier for potential competitors. Besides, it would be difficult to replicate this supply chain network that uses Mumbai's jam-packed local trains as its backbone.

II. CURRENT COMPETITION

Porter’s five forces theory states that strategy is determined by a unique combination of activities that deliver a different value proposition than competitors or the same value proposition in a better way.The dabbawallas do face competition from fast food joints as well as office canteens. However, since neither of these serve home food, the dabbawallas’ core offering remains unchallenged. They have also tied up with many catering services and hotels to cater to the vast number of office goers.

III. BARGAINING POWER OF BUYERS

The delivery rates of the dabbawallas are so nominal (about Rs 300 per month) that one simply wouldn't bargain any further. Also, their current monopoly negates any scope of bargaining on the part of their customers. Thus, we encounter a perfect win-win combination for the customers as well as the dabbawallas.

IV. BARGAINING POWER OF SELLERS

The dabbawallas use minimum infrastructure and practically no technology, hence they are not dependent on suppliers. Since they are a service-oriented organisation, they are not dependent on sellers to buy their product. Hence, sellers do not assume any prominence as would be the case in a product-oriented company. The strategy map framework in Porter's theory allows companies to identify and link together the critical internal processes and human, information and organisation capital that deliver the value proposition differently or better. Human capital is the greatest driving force in the dabbawalla community; as a result, they are not dependent on suppliers or technology, thus negating the seller's power in the equation.

V. THREAT OF A NEW SUBSTITUTE PRODUCT OR SERVICE

As substitutes to home cooked food are not seen as a viable alternative in the Indian scenario, the threat to the dabbawalla service is not an issue at least in the foreseeable future. This gives them a leeway to probably expand their already existing network into newer cities as demand increases in these places as well.

DABBAWALA FROM MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE**SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGEMENT**

The NMTBSCT has the monopoly over the meal delivery service which has become possible by the excellent distribution logistics and the high reputation; it has gained a considerable competitive edge in a specific segment of the Mumbai market. Traditionally, logistics were regarded only as a function that allowed the enterprise to optimise materials, goods and intangible flows, like information. With the emergence of the "supply chain" concept that the dabbawallas appear to use in their management approach, the whole logistics process has been redefined to optimise links and coordination among suppliers, customers and distribution. In this respect, the inventory levels and flow of goods in the supply chain have been optimised, with an increase in the production efficiency of the enterprise and its fulfilment of incoming orders, while improving customer service by keeping prices down. The association therefore appears as an organisation capable of planning, implementing, and monitoring delivery operations, and as an expert in the "art" of moving materials, people and information from one place to another in order to satisfy customers.

What is known today as "supply chain management" has been effectively, internalized by the entrepreneurs of Mumbai's meal delivery sector. The logistics essential to managing the distribution network revolve around the availability of urban infrastructures and the cultural approach that dabbawala customers have to food. The dabbawallas adapt their distribution logistics and planning process to customer needs, taking into account the flexibility of their own working group. The dabbawala distribution system can be compared with that of postal delivery and of a Mumbai goods retailer. In the first case, the mail is sent to a single central sorting branch and then delivered to the final recipient via a hub that handles distribution operations. The goods retailer, on the other hand, uses a zone map system similar to that of the dabbawallas, i.e. identifying groups of vendors within coded zones and then supplying each of these through a sub-sorting unit. Although logistical considerations are important in meal delivery organisation, there is a strong likelihood that the dabbawala system relies mainly on Mumbai's specific culture which, in turn, orients the executive committee's planning. The dabbawallas identified Mumbai as a source of opportunity and their delivery process developed by taking into account the changing metropolis and the evolution of the preferences and well-being of the inhabitants, the urban infrastructure and social characteristics. Indeed, the service is difficult to replicate in other cities precisely because several elements characteristic of Mumbai are absent in other urban contexts, a very extensive transport network and large working class, combined with the cultural unity of the dabbawala association rooted in the rural areas around the city. Considering these aspects, it can safely be said that Mumbai is the cultural milieu underpinning the dabbawala distribution rationale, the mental map that underlies their work and from which they draw inspiration.

SIX SIGMA

In 1998, the American magazine Forbes conducted a study of the dabbawala service and awarded its organisation a 6 Sigma, with a 99.9999% accuracy rate. This means that only one tiffin in every six million deliveries goes astray.

NOVICE AND "REALISTIC MANAGEMENT"

Most dabbawallas are illiterate or have attended only the early years of elementary schooling. Yet this does not seem to pose a problem to their tiffin pick-up and delivery work, because the basic skills required for their job rely on two main resources: possessing the physical strength needed to carry heavy tiffin baskets and being a native of the areas common to all dabbawallas. These two elements complement each other, because they allow workers to ground their communication in a shared language and a shared faith, as well as in a body language they recognise as their own.

SURVIVING THE COMPETITION

The shared aim of each dabbawala team is to deliver the customer's lunch on time. The group is organised internally so that if one of the dabbawallas is absent, he is replaced by a colleague. Moreover, the system requires a mentality that promotes the sharing of responsibilities with intensified interpersonal cooperation. Dabbawallas therefore manage their business without interfering with that of others, since they know that the fortune of each person is closely connected to the system's overall success. The association's structure and the type of contract applied to the dabbawallas also foster "cooperative competition". This means the groups compete amongst themselves to acquire more customers for their own lines, and cooperate with co-workers in the group to increase profit and, at the same time, membership for the NMTBSCT.

WORK ETHICS

Beyond the code of ethics that underpins the delivery service—no alcohol to be consumed during working hours; wearing a topi cap to be recognised by customers; delivering food as if it were an act of faith; in short, all the rules summarised in the expression "work is worship"—there is also a certain empathy with the customer. Through a non-aggressive attitude, the dabbawala connects with what is probably the most "sentimental" part of Mumbai, the bond that exists amongst members of the family when they are apart during working hours (a wife to a husband, a mother to her children), and which is expressed in the daily act of feeding.

CULTIVATING EMPATHY WITH THE CUSTOMER

Dabbas' customers are predominantly men, and work six days a week outside the home, spending little time with their families. The wife usually gets up early in the morning to prepare breakfast, and after her children and husband have left for school and work, she begins to cook lunch for her spouse, waiting for a dabbawala to arrive and pick it up. When the dabbawala reaches the place of work, the husband opens it up and enjoys home-cooked food. The meal embodies familiar traditions, recipes and flavours. Since it is the wife who usually cleans the tiffin after it is returned, she can judge how much her husband enjoyed his meal when she sees if there are any leftovers.

The long relationship of trust that enables this everyday emotional connection between the city and its "bicycle runners" has its basis in the association's internal rules. In fact, when the mukadam recruits, the aspiring dabbawala has to be of proven honesty and any violators are stigmatized by the group without having to resort to other type of justice.

BUILDING A CLIENTELE

While finding new customers is one of the mukadam's main tasks, a first contact is more often established through word of mouth among acquaintances and there is no particular strategy. Potential customers recognise a dabbawala on the street by his clothing, or they meet him at work, because his job involves delivering lunch to their co-workers. It would appear that the most important aspect for a prospective customer is that they trust a neighbour who, in turn, trusts a dabbawala.

INTERGENERATIONAL TIES

The children of dabbawallas who have grown up in Mumbai often do not want to continue the work of the family. This resistance depends on several factors: often they are better educated and therefore aspire to professional prospects that were unthinkable for their parents. They also may want to withdraw from a job that appears tiring and socially degrading.

BEST TECHNOLOGY: THE RAILWAY NETWORK AS A MENTAL MAP

The dabbawala service draws its strength from a rational philosophy, an architecture of values that sustains a long-lived business based on minimum technology. These characteristics fit into the Mumbai way of life for two reasons: on the one hand, the dabbawallas convert their source values into knowledge of the urban

territory and thus connect with the desires of people at an essential, intimate, and emotional level; on the other, the world of "small things" that they represent finds the widespread transport network, in particular the railways (with their low environmental impact), to be the means for reaching every customer.

EFFECTIVE HIERARCHY

The association has more than four thousand semi-literate members and has survived the industry for more than a hundred years. With efficient collaboration between the different levels of operation like the governing council consisting of president, vice-president, general secretary, treasurer and nine directors; the mukadams and the Dabbawalas the association provides a customer loyal door to door delivery service.

CIPHER METHOD

Dabbawalas collect and deliver Tiffin boxes from every corner of the city serving over a million families. The boxes are coded with a particular set of colors which define the region of reception and delivery. The codes are governed by an experience set of mukadams who have good knowledge about the ciphering technique. It is said that even a minute mistake in the coding or the decoding can put the complete system in a mess.

CO-ORDINATION AND SUPPORT

The service comprises of many small groups which are financially independent but work together with great synchronization. Though there is tough competition among the groups to fetch customers and provide better service, they work towards the same goal.

TIME MANAGEMENT

For the delivery service the most important parameter is the time. Any discrepancy in the timeliness of the service results in service failure. Hence the mission to deliver the Dabbas starts every morning at 9 and by the lunch time that is about 12 in the noon, all the boxes are coded dispatched and delivered. Post lunch, the whole process is reversed and the dabbas are returned back to the respective houses.

REFERRALS

To acquire more customers, the Dabbawalas encourage their clients to make referrals to their relatives friends and acquaintances. Nothing can boost the business more than promotion and references of the services backed by customer satisfaction.

UTMOST DEPENDENCE ON HUMAN CAPITAL

The most vital link in this chain of food delivery is human capital. The procedures could have been laid down over a century ago, but it is the implementation of the procedures that makes the system work. The Mumbai dabbawalas propagate that correct amount of human dependence can yield amazing results.

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

The threads of integrity and honesty hold the dabbas together. Though it is lunchtime for dabbawalas also, the aroma wafting from the dabbas has never tempted them. Overcoming a basic instinct like hunger is possible only because of strong roots in a culture that encourages truthfulness and integrity.

RECRUITMENT POLICIES AND MANPOWER MANAGEMENT

Over the years, the dabbawalas has become a growing community of busy delivery-men who carry out their work with honesty and commitment. This is because each person in the value chain is selected very carefully and with due recommendation only. The implication of the word 'recommendation' is different from the common parlance - the referrer assumes responsibility for the incumbent's conduct throughout the working life.

CONCLUSION

The belief that technology is indispensable to solve complex problems is shattered with the operating system of dabbawala. FMCGs and other industries can learn a lot from the simple supply chain logistics and efficient reverse logistics i.e. transfer of empty lunch boxes to the source location. The concept of multi-level coding, colour coding on the lunch boxes for identification and reverse logistics can be implemented in industries as diverse as soft drinks, where logistics becomes an important aspect, transporting the filled bottles to retailers and collecting empty bottles back to the plants, in pharmaceuticals and other FMCG areas. For example, bar coding mechanism (a computerized format) which is prevalent and expensive, can be simplified with just colour/ number coding. In small and medium scale organisations where bar coding systems would require a lot of resources, these systems can prove to be very efficient and cost effective. Moreover, the dependence on technology could be drastically reduced. The learnings for a working executive are enormous too. Managers and executives alike spend a lot of their valuable time learning various concepts in people and time management. Newer mechanisms like Customer Relationship Management, etc, have been developed to assist executives in the same. But, in the midst of implementing technology and IT, basic principles in people management, sustainable relationship development and customer satisfaction have lost their meaning. Dabbawallas are a perfect example of an important principle of both business and management, the thirst to serve customers in a simple yet effective fashion without falling into the technology trap. I think this is an aspect which needs to be re-learned and implemented in any organisation today. The most enduring lesson that we learnt was to put the customer ahead of everything else. It is said that when Prince Charles expressed a desire to meet them during his visit in 2003, the dabbawallas requested him to schedule the meeting such that it did not interfere with their mid-day delivery timings.

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