

Mumbai Dabbawalas -the lessons they taught me

by Sunil Karve, Founder Trustee & Vice Chairman - MET League of Colleges

The famous Mumbai Dabbawalas were at the MET League of Colleges a few days ago. They made the same presentation they had delivered at Harvard Business School. At an interesting and interactive session they spoke about the organisational structure, working style, and delivery systems of their organisation - the Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Supplier's Association - to a packed weekend gathering of METizens.

A lot has already been said about the supply chain management systems used by the Mumbai Dabbawalas. They have received global applause and are featured as case studies in B School books. However, what I took home was not just management fundas but lessons that I will cherish all my life. Since these lessons impacted me greatly, I felt that I must share my learnings with you. Therefore I decided to write this letter.

Apart from career-making tips, I learnt life-changing tips on honesty, commitment, stress management, humility, discipline, and HR and time management. During the various challenges in life, I am sure that the values followed by the dabbawalas will give you strength to rise above the toughest odds.

The lessons I learnt are:

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.

Discipline and Time Management

The dabbawalas operate on the Chanakya system of *Sama-Dama-Danda-Bhed* for the errant members. This ensures that the errant member stays within the system. Secondly, they are extremely particular about time and realise the value of every second in the value chain. So much so that when Prince Charles wanted to meet them, they gave him a precise time slot so that the thousands others would not have to skip their lunch.

Pride towards their work

The dabbawalas take their role as '*Annadatas*' very seriously. For them, the delivery of tiffins is much beyond a job - it means quelling the hunger that strikes the customer when lunch hour approaches. And so they move about their mission briskly with a smile, making sure they are never late.

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.

Complete Contentment

There was an unseen halo of positive vibrations around the members who delivered the talk. The glow on their faces came from complete contentment with their lives. They seemed as if they possessed all the happiness and riches in life. 'Be contented in what you have' is the principle that governs their life. This is particularly surprising because the members earn not more than 5-6 thousand a month and lead a very hard life compared to most of us. Still there was not even an iota of stress on their faces - quite contrary to many others who earn much more than them.

Musical Meditation

The dabbawalas belong to a sect called *Warkari* that regularly chants songs of praise to the Lord. Their daily *bhajans* sessions seem to play an important role in relieving the day's stress. They truly embody a living where one looks beyond materialistic earnings and serves with commitment for a cause.

Sustained success will lead to fame

The dabbawalas believe in doing their work properly and have been ensuring that the 'zero error' flag is held high. The one thing that emerged very strongly is that they continue to do their work without thinking about any gain. Maybe that's why success and popularity is chasing them .

I do not know about you, but I could not help thinking about these humble angels all night. Is it not strange that though the Mumbai Dabbawalas have been operating since 1890 and it is only recently that you and I have noticed them? If the Dabbawalas had not received due recognition from Prince Charles, Harvard and C K Pralhad, would there be packed audiences to listen to their talk? The answer is obvious. Why does one need a *phoren* certificate to appreciate local goodness?

I urge you to look around and discover many noble souls like the Mumbai Dabbawalas. These souls may not have received the limelight yet, but continue to carry out their work quietly. If one develops a keen eye to notice

positives, one can achieve success in every endeavour. So, begin fishing for goodness - starting today. If you apply your mind to this, I am sure you will be able to gain much more than what I could.

Do share your experiences with me on skarve_trust@met.edu.

Best of Luck and Happy Learning!

Sunil Karve

Founder Trustee and Vice Chairman

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