

Hitting the bull's-eye, the Mumbai Dabbawalas way

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Mumbai, capital of finance, of prowess, of industry, where rags become riches and ambition finds inspiration. Embedded in cinematic imagination is the city's resilient character; come what may, the city gets back on its feet and solders on. A plausible reason could be that its 200,000 office goers are fed warm, home-cooked meals on lunchtime.

The Dabbawala, an army of 5,000 odd Gandhi-topi wearing delivery men who peddle through the city collecting circular steel-tiffins, distribute them to their precise owners and return them, all in a span of three hours. What really makes it a subject of intrigue for ethnographers is that these men are mostly uneducated, bereft of any technical support, management hierarchies or documentation. They simply internalise a 125-year old delivery system that runs on colour coding, and perfect it through perseverance.

At an interactive session 'The Dabbawalas of Mumbai' organised FICCI Ladies Organisation (FLO), Abhishek Dinkar Ekal, VP of Dabbawala Foundation offered more insight on this. "Almost 85 per cent dabbawalas are illiterate and the remaining 15 per cent are educated up to 10th grade. However, through years of dedicated work, time management, strike-less work and gaining experience in logistics, the dabbawalas have created a place in the sun."

The session went on to highlight the several management lessons that can be drawn from the network of food delivery.

For instance, how big businesses can run on low capital investment, low operational costs, focus only on serving customers satisfactorily, not to be over dependent on technology and build business around existing infrastructure. The most important lesson, however, is that cooperation is the key for success.

Emphasising the beauty of a people-run organisation, Ekal noted, "The local dabbawalas at the receiving and the sending ends are known to the customers personally, so that there is no question of lack of trust."

"Though the work sounds simple, it is actually a highly specialized trade that has developed over a century and has become an integral part of Mumbai's culture," noted Sakaram Sitaram Gavande, Secretary, Dabbawala Foundation.

With dramatic detail, the session discussed how the Dabbawala network has achieved a 6 sigma level of accuracy in this business, which means only one mistake in six million chances. Even a single miss is enough to inspire a work of great cinema, such is their charm.