DABBAWALA – EXEMPLIFYING AND EPITOMIZING HENRY FAYOL'S GENERAL MANAGEMENT PRINCIPLES

Nirav Majmudar

ABSTRACT

Dabbawala has been a much narrated case study in Logistics Management. The paper strongly opines that the success of the Dabbawala lies in their attitude and ideology. The paper takes a different view to as a Case study to learn General Administrative Management. This case study digs into the philosophy and practices of the Dabbawala and thereby infers what fetches them 6 Sigma certification, what makes Richard Branson travel with them in a jam packed train, what makes Prince Charles invite them for marriage. The paper initially talks about their modus operandi, and then enumerates the achievements and highlights of Dabbawala. The paper then tries to understand the psychological aspects about their organisation and puts forth 21 learning for general administration of organisation. Their attitude, approach and discipline are beyond just praising, actually one must learn from them. The paper recommends organisations to follow these 21 practices as a means to implement most of the 14 principles of Administrative Management and explains the rationale for saying so. Although Henry Fayol has developed the Administrative Management and its 14 principles, the Dabbawala have unknowingly exemplified & epitomized most of them in practice, and they have much more in store to learn from.

Keywords: Dabbawala, Six Sigma, General Management, Henry Fayol.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Either write something worth reading, or do something worth writing", these are the words of Benjamin Franklin (A renowned scientist, writer & politician was one of the founding father of the US). Relating this line to Mumbai Dabbawala (Dabbawala is made of two hindi words – Dabba and wala. Dabba means Tiffin; Tiffin is an old-fashioned English word for a light lunch carried in a box. The word Dabba with the prefix 'wals' meaning 'linked to', means those who carry tiffin box.)- most of the Dabbawala are either semi-literate or illiterate, thus seemingly they would not be in a position to write something great. But the Dabbawala have done something which has been of great interest to academics & industrial fraternity. Ever since the publication about Dabbawala in Forbes Magazine in 1998, the Dabbawala have been an enlightening case to contemplate.

The business of the Dabbawala is to deliver home made fresh food at offices before lunch time. That's it. Seemingly a very simple concept, the Dabbawala have highly specialized this task. The task if examined considering the time, distance, technology, magnitude, mode of commutation, educational qualification of employees and other external exigencies; turns out to be a benchmark and a piece of eruditeness.

II. METHODOLOGY

The paper is an attempt to gain insights about the success of Dabbawala. Although the Case Study of Dabbawala is used in logistics management, the paper aims at digging further into organisation and management of Dabbawala. Thus, the paper adopts Exploratory Research Design to look into the Dabbawala from a new angle and lay groundwork for further research. This has been done by studying their practices & philosophies in lights of the practices and philosophies of Dabbawala as understand directly from the session and interaction with Dr. Pawan Kumar Aggrawal (a Ph.D on Dabbawala) as well as the resources available online.

III. MODUS OPERANDI

What's required is a brief view at what does these Dabbawala do and what is so laudatory about this simple task. It has to be understood in terms of the premises they work in like time, distance, etc. mentioned in the introduction.

The Dabbawala starts their day in morning around 9 at picking the Tiffin boxes from homes. The time constraint is they need to pick the Tiffin box after the customer leaves his home for office, and deliver it to the office before lunch time. The question here is why can't the customer themselves carry the Tiffin box? There are two reasons for it. First, the workplaces in Mumbai are too far (may even be 1 or 2 hours), so they need to start early (around 7 am), so it's too early to get the Tiffin ready. Second, the most common mode of transport (for several reasons) is railways, and the fact that the rush in Mumbai trains is so much that it is not possible for a novice to travel even bare handed. Thus the customers do not carry their lunch box with them. The test of Dabbawala is to pick the Tiffin after the customer leaves home, deliver it to the Offices before lunch time, and deliver back the empty Tiffin to their homes before the customers reach back to their home after office.

There are about 5000 employees each carrying 30-40 Dabbas every day, thus carrying 200,000 Dabbas and 400,000 transactions everyday. There is '0% error' in any of these 400,000 transactions everyday, and to add to this accuracy – this accuracy is from over a century and they do it in record 3 hours. Now the

question is what do they do for it? Amazingly, they do not use any technology; they use a simple coding system (A pictorial example of coding system used by Dabbawala is available at http://mumbaibaddawala.org/code.html) with alphabets, numbers and numbers. To add to the beauty of the system the Dabbawala picking the Dabba and the one delivering it to the office both are different, it is the coding system which makes this possible. Each Dabbawala carries on an average 30-40 Dabbas in morning and carries it either on their head or by handcarts to the railway stations. Due to shortage of time the Dabbas are sorted in the train itself, on an average the Dabbas are sorted 5-6 times to reach to the destination and even trains are changed for long distance delivery. The other exigencies are- Delay to get Dabbas on time from home, Traffic on the road, Road blockages due to other reasons, Rush in trains, Delay in trains, monsoon etc., delay due to any of these exigencies has rippling effect.

IV. HIGHLIGHTS

Instead of all the premises and exigencies the following are the highlights of their work

      a. 4 Lakh transactions per day
      b. 0% Modern Technology
      c. Error Rate : 1 in 6 million transactions
      d. 0% Fuel
      e. No Strike
      f. No Court Case
      g. No Attrition
      h. 100% Customer Satisfaction

V. ACHIEVEMENTS

The following are the key achievements (Dabbawala, 2011) of Dabbawala worth noting:

a. Six Sigma Performance
b. Record With Guinness Book of World Record
c. Registered with Ripley's "Believe it or not".
d. Received ISO 9001 : 2000 Certificate
e. Fie Foundation Award's 2007
f. One Among Top 50 Indians
g. One Among most 10 favourite things in Mumbai along with "Wada Pav"
h. Invitation for lectures at Fortune 500 Companies and many other Government organisations, Academic Institutions & Associations across the globe.

VI. LEARNING FOR MANAGEMENT

On his one day travel with Dabbawala Richard Branson- the CEO of Virgin Ltd., took a photograph with the Dabbawala and said that he gives his employees the challenge to work like the Dabbawala. The paper after thorough understanding of the modus operandi as well as ideology of the Dabbawala excogitates the following learning for General Management for every small and large company. Extant researches have been done on Dabbawala as a Case to learn Logistics and Supply Chain Management, but the paper takes a different perspective. The paper probes into what is it that fetches so many achievement as well as this heights of perfection. The paper now extracts the practices from General Management perspective and identifies 21 practices.

1. **Generating business idea** – Everyone and anyone who wants to start a business invariably think about which business to start with. They think of identifying a business which is profitable. The case of Dabbawala origin teaches us that the starting point of a business should not be to identify a profitable business, it should rather be identification of unsatisfied need of the customer. A genuine need identification means searching for what business can one do to satisfy the unfulfilled needs. If one can identify true benefit to customer, one would end up getting benefits thereafter.

2. **Customer Orientation:** The vision, mission and values of the organisation must clearly aim at inculcating and implementing customer orientation. Business houses today talk about the Adam Smith's propaganda of 'Customer is the King". These Dabbawalas go one step ahead and believes that "Customer is God", and this principle is infused in each and every employee of Dabbawala.

3. **Maintain human significance**: Today most of the organisation is blindly running behind adopting latest manufacturing technology, SAP modules, and so on. They spent heavily on the same. The problem with such organisation is that, in most of the firm the technology, the process and the systems is given much importance as compared to the People who use it. The employee there feels like either being machines themselves or else being like a 'Cog in the machine'. Thus employees do not find the required motivation and zeal to work for the organisation. One of the typical features of Dabbawala organisation is that it is build as 'No Technology' firm. Here organisation is built around people, and not around fancy & costly technology. The employees get a sense of importance in the organisation

because of this. Thus Dabbawala have a record attrition rate, neither the employees quits nor the association terminates their services.

4. **Organisation fit is more important that Job fit:** There are two terms used here. Job fit refers to how well a prospective employee would be able to adapt to the job skills and knowledge. While Organisation fit refers to how well the prospective employee would be able to adapt to the values and principles of the organisation, this would work only if the personal attitude and belief system matches with that of organisational culture and values. A person, who has conflicting attitude to that of organisation values, would feel suffocated in the organisation, or the company may not find him suitable for long run. Whereas Job fit can be easily developed by training, organisation fit is difficult to attain. One of the reason why there is so high group cohesiveness among Dabbawala is that, '98% of Dabbawala are Maharashtrians and they are from Pune and surrounding areas only (Dabbawala, 2011)' and each one of them is from a specific community called as the 'Varkari (Varkari is a **Error! Bookmark not defined.** religious movement (sampraday) within the bhakti spiritual tradition of Hinduism, geographically associated with the Indian states of Maharashtra and northern Karnataka The Varkari movement includes the worship of Krishna in the form of Vithoba and a duty-based approach towards life emphasising, moral behavior and strict avoidance of alcohol and tobacco, strict vegetarian.) (Gethe, Varkari Movement, 2010), who share same common values.

5. **Develop among employees the sense of purpose and value for their work**: Attitudes are contagious, and the attitude of Dabbawala towards their work is worth catching. Dabbawala are highly motivated towards their work. They feel that their 'work is worship', and they have a sense of pride in saying that they deliver food. They believe serving food, is serving God.

6. **Ethics in business**: Probably everyone must have direct or indirect experience of the charges taken by school transport vehicles. They take monthly charges from the parents for their service to pick and drop the children between home and school. The common practice is they would charge you for 12 months, whereas effectively they have to work for only 9-10 months, which is legal too. But Ethics goes beyond law. It would be astonishing to know that the Dabbawala if do not deliver for 1 or 2 months (due to transfer, vacation, or any other reason for the customer), would not charge for those 1 or 2 months.

7. **Recruit in an inexpensive and reliable way:** The Dabbawala follow a very simple recruitment policy. They hire new employee only through employee referral. The employee giving referral takes the responsibility that the prospective employee would work with full dedication and has good background. The new employee is usually know to few or atleast one employee, and thus gels well with the current employees.

8. **Adopt inexpensive and effective Training methods:** Dabbawala job is not technology oriented, so even unskilled person can do the job. Although, they need to understand the concept of coding and understand how the Dabbas are collected, sorted and distributed. Dabbawala adopt on-the job training method, which is inexpensive and also effective.

9. **Salary through competitive collaboration:** Another interesting practice is how they decide the salary of the employees. All the employees almost earn equal salary around 5000 to 6000 p.m. plus one month salary as Diwali bonus from the customer. It is interesting to note that the Dabbawala are classified in a small group headed by supervisor (called as Mukadam). Each group works for the special area and decides on their own how many members would be in that group. Each group also decides whether to keep any surplus employee with them. This additional employee helps in lifting, carrying and sorting of Dabbas on daily basis, but works as a makeshift for the employee who is on leave. These groups get lump sum money from the association and then they divide it equally among the group members.

10. **Develop responsible autonomy**: Dabbawala are highly motivated and disciplined in their work. A point worth noting is that they do not need extra supervision to control their behaviour. They are never late to work, they are never late to deliver, they seldom enter into any dispute with group members or passengers in train, and there is zero absenteeism. External controls are always a burden. Dabbawala are always so charged up and this comes from their love and respect to their work.

11. **Not to lean too much towards Lean Organisation to cut cost**: Although there is no trend of absenteeism in the employees of Dabbawala, usually each group of Dabbawala have an additional member to help others and to work if anyone is absent. As income is equally distributed among each group, this extra employee reduces the income of the group members. Still, not concerned with money, and highly concerned for perfection in work, they keep an additional employee with them. This is against the modern lean

management practices, which always seeks to curtail expenses, employees and material.

12. **Organisational structure:** The organisation structure is very flat and follows only 3 tier system. The President is also one of the Dabbawala only. This flat organisation structure has threefold advantage, viz. cost efficiency, better & fast communication and, quick decision making.

13. **Create a sense of ownership:** Another incredible aspect about the Dabbawala is that, the Dabbawala never feel that they are employees and the president & supervisors are the employer. They have a sense of ownership for their work and consider themselves as the owner and entrepreneur. This automatically brings in the principle of subordination of individual interest to organisational interest.

14. **Conflict Resolution technique**: The members of the Association can seek for conflict resolution from the association in their fortnightly meeting. They charge Rs. 100 for each issue, just to ensure that the organisation time is not wasted in petty bickering and those seeking genuine solution come for conflict resolution. Although, there are fights and are brought to association, there is a great tendency to accept the solution given by association as all binding. Each and every member pave such a high respect & trust towards the seniors and association that they accept the solution, never challenge and as soon as the meeting is over forget about their conflicts.

15. **Leadership style and behaviour:** The leader of each group is known as Mukadam. As a means of practice the senior most is accepted as their Mukadam, and no one else argues or questions the leadership. One reason for such acceptance is that, being leader does not mean additional power and authority. It means additional responsibility. The Mukadam is responsible to do the sorting of the Dabbas and managing the group. Apart from this he takes the extra pain to remember the renewal dates for train pass of each employee, he even pays sometimes for the same, and in certain cases takes note and helps about each employees personal problems related to his family and children.

16. **Think sustainability, not just profitability**: Modern companies are characterized by highly pressured sales team. The amount of pressure is so high that they even resort to unethical practices. For most of the business house sales and profits are the only issues. But, Dabbawala are different.

They work toward excellence and perfection of their work and not profits. They say profit is the by-product of their efforts. Dabbawala even stop giving services to bad customers (who do not adhere to keeping their Tiffins ready on time). Apart from this after the terrorist attack, they are very vigilant in serving a new customer. They inquire thoroughly about the new customer and then only provide their services. This shows that they aim excellence & sustainability, and not for profit.

17. **Keep it simple concept:** The Dabbawala are semi literate people. Thus the coding system which they follow must be simple. They follow a simple hand written codes and colors to identify whose Dabba it is, which station is that to be carried, and which building is it to be delivered.

18. **No Power Conflicts:** A question arises to mind whether there would be power conflicts and dirty politics in the organisation (like others). The answer is, strictly no. This is because even the Mukadam as well as the President does the same work of delivering. Thus higher authority only means additional authority and responsibility. Thus, people are being sometimes poked to become the President, and no dirty politics is observed.

19. **Awareness of Key Result Areas:** People are the core to this organisation and time is the key. They say that 'In Mumbai- Railways are the life-lines, while Dabbawala are the Food-lines'. The customers praising them says that, 'Our watches may go wrong, but the Dabbawala would never be'. This is because each employee knows what the importance of time is. They themselves call their morning time unto 12 am as 'war time', as they can't afford to loose even a minute in morning. This means that they are aware totally about their key result area.

20. **Aim for Customer Satisfaction, and not for certification**: The Dabbawala are ISO 9001:2000 certified. They are among the elite Organisation with Six Sigma performance. The question as a form of learning is, what did they do to get this mammoth certification? An eyebrow raising answer is 'Nothing'. Literally they did nothing to get the certificate. They just worked with one notion of 'Customer Satisfaction'.

21. **Teamwork & group feeling:** The Dabbawala have the feeling of family amongst them. May be as most of them are from same community (Varkari), and also that they are recruited by employee referrals; they exhibit exemplary team spirit. Almost all the members help others in case of

problems (83% of Dabbawala help their team members in case of problems. Social Behaviour) (Dabbawala, 2011) Even though they earn a meager Rs. 5000 to Rs. 6000, they willingly contribute from their salary every month for the association. For the senior members they give less workload, but pay the same from the group earning.

VII. COMPARISON WITH ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGEMENT OF HENRY FAYOL

Henry Fayol is known as the father of Administrative Management. He served as the manager of for 22 years and then was appointed as the General Manager of the company and held this position for 30 years. He wrote his experiences, practices and observation in the form of a book titled 'Administration Industriella et Generale' in French. It was never taken outside France till 1929. It's English version was then published lately in 1949 in USA. It was then he received prominence for his contribution to Management. This section of the paper attempts to compare the 21 practices of Dabbawala with that of the 14 Principles of Fayol.

Fayol's classification of business activities

Glinting into the genesis of Henry Fayol's 14 principles it is noted that they necessarily come from the complex Industrial fraternity. As against this the Dabbawala are from a simple organisation. Due to the complex nature of Industries Fayol felt that the activities of the business could be divided into six group viz. Technical, Commercial, Financial, Security, Accounting and Managerial. Each group needed separate attention, and Management was treated as one of the six functions of an Industry. As compared to this Dabbawala is a organisation without any technology, without major commercial activities, without much finance, and not much to guard to security, and negligible need for complex accounting. Thus the only activity which is left is Managerial activity. Thus the major focus if any in Dabbawala is with the Managerial Activities.

Fayol's 14 principles

The 14 principles of Henry Fayol are very well accepted in business management. The table 1 shows each of these 14 principles and tries to find out to whether Dabbawala unknowingly practices Fayol's 14 principles. The below table lists each principle of Fayol in column one and briefs about it. The second column shows whether Dabbawala follow it or not. They symbol '#' followed by number shows the corresponding practice of Dabbawala to the respective Principle of Fayol as listed in this paper i.e. Section V – Learning for

Management. While the last column gives brief description about the respective principle and practice.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Although Dabbawala are an ISO Certified organisation, they do not need it any. They are a standard in themselves. Their attitude, approach and discipline are beyond just praising, actually all must learn from them (like what Richard Branson insists his employees to do). Although, the learning are applicable for all types of organisation small or large, the author is of the strong opinion that the above mentioned learning have far reaching implication especially for SME who cannot afford costly technology, who cannot modernize their software every now and then, who cannot spend much on advertisement and even on training (this is just an opinion, this can be an area for further research). It is worth noting that though Henry Fayol has developed the Administrative Management and its 14 principles, the Dabbawala have unknowingly exemplified & epitomized most of them in practice and they have much more in store to learn from viz. Organisation fit is more important than job fit, sense of value and purpose for work, Ethics in Business, Recruit in inexpensive and reliable way, Inexpensive & effective Training methods, Not to lean too much on lean organisation, & Think Sustainability, not just profitability.

REFERENCES:
Agrawal, D. P. (n.d.). *Behavior*. Retrieved September 12,2011, from mumbaidabbawala: http://mumbaidabbawala. org/behavior.html

Agrawal, D. P. (n.d.). Coding. Retrieved September 12,2011, from mumbaidabbawala: http://mumbaidabbawala. org/code.html

Agrawal, D. P. (n.d.). News. Retrieved September 12,2011, from mumbaidabbawala: http://mumbaidabbawala. org/news.html

Dabbawala, M. (2011). Retrieved October 15, 2011, from Mumbai Dabbawala: http://mumbaidabbawala.org/achievements.html

Dhanushaq. (2010, February 3). The Amazing Dabbawala. Retrieved September 12,2011, from http://www.mybangalore.com/article/0210/the-amazing-Dabbawala-.html

Gethe, S. (2010). *Book Varkari Movement.* Retreived November 29, 2015, from www.academia.edu:
https://www.academia.edu/4231089/Book_Varkari_Movements

Gethe, S. (2008). *Varkari Movement.* Mumbai.

Percot, M. (1991). Dabbawala, Tiffin Carriers of Mumbai: Answering a Need for Specific Catering. Retreived September 12,2011, from hal.inria.fr/docs/00/03/54/97/PDF/DABBA.pdf

Prasad, L. (2004). *Principles and Practices of Management, 6e.* New Delhi: Sultan Chand & Sons.

Rao, P. (2009). *Principles of Management.* Hyderabad: Himalaya Publishing House.

Stoner, J., Freeman, R. E., & Gilbert, D. (2009). *Management, 6e.* New Delhi: Pearson Education.

Tan, E. (2011, January 3). 10 Management Lessons from the Dabbawala. Retreived September 12,2011, from http://www.theedgemalaysia.com/management/181306-10-management-lessons-from-the- Dabbawala.html

Thakker, P. (June 2006). Mumbai's Dabbawala: heterarchy & responsible autonomy. Retreived September 12,2011, from HYPERLINK "http://www.triarchypress.com/" www.triarchypress.com/ pages/ articles/ Mumbai's%20Dabbawala.pdf

The cult of the dabbawala. (2008, July 10). *Economist Article* . Retreived September 12,2011, from www.economist.com/node/11707779/comments

What Harvard is learning from the mumbai Dabbawala. (2011, January 3). Retreived September 12,2011, from http://www.theedgemalaysia.com/management/181306-10-management-lessons-from-the- Dabbawala.html

TABLE

Table 1: Comparison of Fayol's Principles with Dabbawala Practices

Fayol's Principles	Dabbawala Practices	Description
Division of Labour – specialize in small part of a work	**Yes** - (see Modus Operandi)	-Dabbawala does not specialize in small work, but they specialize in each area, and are familiar with that geographical area.
Authority - manager can't demand authority, it must be commanded by personal authority	**Yes** - #14, #15 & #18	- The Mukadam and President command respect from the members, and their words are taken as the last words.
Discipline – members must respect and follow organisational rules	**Yes** - #10	- Dabbawala have epitomized discipline, with no delays, no absenteeism and no dysfunctional conflicts, no errors, no drinking during work time.
Unity of Command – One boss at a time	**Yes** - #15	- Each group has only one boss, called as Mukadam.
Unity of Direction – One goal at a time	**Yes** - #1, #2, #9, & #20	- The only goal of the organisation is timely delivery and customer satisfaction.
Subordination of Individual Interest to Org – Under conflict, prioritize organisational interest	**Yes** - #13	- Dabbawala shows how this can be achieved by bringing a sense of ownership in organisation.
Remuneration – Fair wages to all employees	**Yes** - #9	- Each and every member gets equal earning in the same group, fair equity is maintained.
Centralisation – degree to which powers lie with superior. It also talks about retaining final responsibility.	**Yes** - (see Modus Operandi)	- Direct concept of centralisation is not observed. Actually each and every employee is the owner and as every practice is clearly defined there is no need for discussion about most of the matters.
Hierarchy – a proper communication channel should be followed for communication.	**Yes** - #14, #15	- Every Dabbawala works in a group and has one superior called the Mukadam. Each employee daily deal with Mukadam only. Only if few issues are not resolved they are taken

		to association.
Order – Material and people should be at right place and right time.	**Yes** – #5, #7, #10, #13, #17, #19 & #20.	- What better can exemplify in practice the concept of order than the Dabbawala. The equipments, the Dabbas as well as the employees are always at the right time & place. This is what fetches them Six Sigma Performance.
Equity – Manager should be friendly and fair to their subordinate.	**Yes -** #9, #14, & #15	- The objective of maintaining equity is to eliminate causes of internal conflicts and grudges. Dabbawala are always fair to every employee, and also the employees accept their decisions.
Stability of Staff – High employee turnover is detrimental to business.	**Yes** – #3	- Dabbawala have a record attrition rate, neither the employees quits the association nor the association terminates their services.
Initiative – subordinates should be given freedom to conceive new ideas	**No**	- Almost everything has remained same since long, and actually they do not want change too. Off late the have adopted accepting customer demands by SMS on mobiles.
Esprit de Corps – Promoting team spirit. Using verbal communication to bring personal touch.	**Yes -** #21	- Yet another epitomizer from the Dabbawala. Also as they do not use technology like mails, they mostly communicate personally.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Nirav Majmudar is the Co-Founder and Chief Mentor at "Stratxpreneur – A Strategy Consulting firm". He has over 9 years of experience in Teaching and Training Students of 5 Universities. A sought after speaker and trainer for various Departments of Government of Gujarat. He has been recently awarded once in life time award as the most 'Innovative Trainer Award 2015' by The Indian Society for Training & Development (ISTD). He has also been awarded for his research work at State, National and International Level Academic Conferences.