

# Dabawaas



**Lessons for building lasting  
success based on values**



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## Lessons for building lasting success based on values

**Shrinivas Pandit**

*Leadership Counsellor*



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*To*

*The loving members of the joint Pandit family*

*Anjali, Shrikant-Arundhati, Nitin-Manjusha,*

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for their mischievous detachment from my strange  
idea of writing a book on the strong business values  
of the Dabawalas of Mumbai.



# Preface

## The Story behind a Durable Business Success



I am excited to tell you the genesis of my search for a “story behind durable business success” because I have discovered insights between strong values and lasting success. The insights are shared here for all to read and enjoy. A glance at my thought process will provide you the rationale.

The true character of any success story is woven in the creative efforts made by people in that enterprise in facing mind-boggling facets of change.

As we all know, the predominant characteristic of change is frequent turbulence. We get its reflection within ourselves. It compels us to scale up our working rhythms for performing our daily tasks within deadlines. Unfortunately such high speed activities lead to oscillating and epileptic living rhythms. Such horrendous 24 x 7 occupation of mental space leaves little space for living.

This shooting script about ‘change’ is baffling. Our limitations stare at us. I think our capacities to enhance competencies to master change are limited. From a common person’s perspective one question nags:

How do successful people amongst us remain anchored, sane, and earn enough to sustain their families in this wayward process of change?

This poser reminded me of Lao-Tzu's famous adage, "Knowing the constant gives an impartial perspective". This means we must identify the 'constants' in this puzzling phenomenon of change. For discerning the 'constants' and 'variables' it is necessary to study businesses and people behind them, who have achieved durable success year after year.

I had done such a study of contemporary business leaders for *Thought Leaders* and *Exemplary CEOs*. The 'constant' that stood out was their commitment to living the values they cherish. Anchored in value set, they lay down milestones through uninterrupted, intelligent practice of the crafts they decide to master. They do not engage themselves in playing the game of blaming others in their mental chatter.

Similarly sportsmen, saints, artists, musicians, authors, media anchors, athletes, cartoonists, comedians, etc. practice long and hard to develop perfection in their chosen vocations. All types of achievers sharpen their skills and mindsets to lay new landmarks in their fields of expertise.

When I tell stories of achievers like Verghese Kurien, Sachin Tendulkar, Narayana Murthy, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Amrita Patel, Anu Aga, Raghunath Mashelkar, Dr. Abdul Kalam, in seminars and conferences I address, the response is overwhelming.



People tell me how much difference such inspiring stories have made in their lives. They yearn to read about such role models and their stories of success.

This story is about a 115-year old successful business operation now carried out by 5000 semi-literate people. It is unfolded here through dialogues between four characters including me:

Raghunath Megde (Raghu) 48, and Gangaram Talekar (Ganga) 55, are the two dabawalas—Tiffin Box Couriers—from Mumbai. Raghu is an arts graduate, whereas Ganga has passed standard eight high school examination. Their upbringing from a village farming community is rustic. They have taken education in the local Marathi medium.

However coarse their ‘Marathi intoned English’ is, it conveys clearly what they want to communicate. They tell their stories passionately. Yet they are not loquacious. As Raghu told me, “Our conversational ability has improved through interaction with English speaking people”. Raghu has a dry sense of humour, whereas Ganga is bubbly.

I am familiar with the slow moving cultural milieu of dabawalas. It is therefore a marvel of sorts to observe how skillfully they sprint through the congested streets of thickly populated Mumbai in busy hours carrying those lunch boxes.

Their dusty white shirts, pyjamas and Gandhi topis (white Gandhi caps) put on like boy scouts, stand out

in contrast to the colourfully dressed men, women, and children in cosmopolitan Mumbai. You find the dabawalas constantly racing forward in the marathon of trains, buses, cars, vans, trucks, three-wheeler autos, bicycles, cart pullers, pedestrians, ice carrying bullock carts, etc., where negligible discipline in lane crossing, overtaking, speed limit, and honking remains the order of the day.

It's a puzzle of sorts how they find space to move their carts to reach the Tiffin boxes unfailingly on time, day in day out, week after week, month after month, and year after year for the last 115 years through all seasons. Wow!

Anita Dalal (Anita), 40, a journalist and well-known business consultant is based in Mumbai. After working in a professionally reputed established business house and in a multinational consulting organization, Anita got interested in the innovative experiments in social engineering that are underway in various parts of India.

Anita has an excellent academic background. After getting a first class first in commerce from University of Bombay she obtained her masters in journalism from Syracuse University in US.

From her US contacts Anita gets an offer to search socially relevant and innovative business opportunity in the service sector in India. While sampling different ideas, her vigorous search leads her to meet Raghu and Ganga.

Our conversation Anita (A), Raghu (R), Ganga (G), and me (S) takes you through a simple business model that works on ground zero realities in this biggest megalopolis of Asia where a whopping population of 11 million lives! The dialogues are alive with wit and wisdom.

In this in-depth search Anita develops an entirely new perspective on management of change. She realises what it takes to nurture socially significant business in such cost escalating change.

You would see how creativity, wisdom, and guidance embedded in the value set of a society get translated into action in daily life.

That's what Raghu and Ganga narrate in English frequently interspersed with Marathi, which I have translated in English. While reading the story you will be amazed to see the way dabawalas find space to earn their living in the fiercely competitive world. Their teams provide customers with real value addition in the unfailing delivery of home-cooked food every day.

Customers have given overwhelming recognition to their 'brand' of dependable service by staying loyal for over a century. There are instances where three generations have carried on with their service. This is repeat order business based on punctual delivery and exemplary service record. The performance of dabawalas' shows, they have learnt the art of living

with wisdom inherited from their illiterate parents, families, spiritual traditions, and local ethnic mores.

From the story we learn, we all are in race with ourselves in this metamorphosis. Strong ancient values can nurture solid modern business. Such durable ventures meet the aspirations and needs of common consumers and barely literate deliverymen.

These illuminating dialogues throw light on eternal conflicts between tradition and modernity, men and machines, ecology and technology, essential consumption and rampant consumerism. The daily battle between craze for 'having' and contented 'being' is won in eking out existence. In short Dabawalas have found the nectar of life, preserved in their value set 'Enough is enough'. It is the confluence of achievement, significance, legacy and happiness, which provides them work-life balance.

I hope you enjoy what you discover from this story. You will learn to cope with nerve racking technological change by updating your physical and mental skills. You have to remember that you are not in race with the speed of change. Contentment is guaranteed if you move just enough with the times while remaining steadfast with your value set.

SHRINIVAS PANDIT

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Friends whose names may have been inadvertently left out.

SHRINIVAS PANDIT



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## Chapter 1

Anita and I met at a seminar on Leadership Development at the Taj Mahal hotel in south Mumbai. We had some friends in common and she had also read my books *Thought Leaders*, *Exemplary CEOs*, and *Design Your Career*.

After the seminar, we moved to the Sea Lounge from where we had a beautiful view of the majestic Gateway of India. Small ferries carrying sightseers to the nearby Elephanta caves looked picture perfect in the disappearing sunlight as it refracted through a mackerel sky.

Anita described this ambience in poetic detail. She has a scholarly look, and much enthusiasm for sharing experiences that have affected her profoundly. The conversation leads her to speak of her meeting with Raghu and Ganga.

**A:** Do you know these *dabawalas*—couriers—and their unbelievable delivery record?

**S:** Yes, I do.

**A:** 5000 semi-literate *dabawalas* daily deliver homemade food to 2,00,000 people within a radius of 60 kms in just about 3 hours. Carrying 2,00,000 tiffin boxes per day amounts to 4,00,000 transactions every single day. The spread of workplaces and residences are like a scatter diagram. Indeed a marvellous feat!

**S:** No doubt about that.

**A:** The error rate is one in 16 million transactions; this is unbelievable time management. Mumbai has outgrown its landscape. Its current population is 10.3 million. Fast food joints and footpath eateries have sprung up all over. Yet Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association has steadily grown.

**S:** What do you think is the main reason for this?

**A:** The craving for home-cooked food. Most people still prefer food made at home, if it can be transported at a reasonable cost from residences to offices. A dabawala charges merely Rs. 200 (or \$4.6) per month per customer, irrespective of distance, weight, or space. In return, he earns Rs. 5000–6000 per month (approximately \$116–140) from the 25–30 customers he serves. In other countries, people do not have this luxury. But if you ask anyone, particularly those belonging to lower income groups anywhere, their first preference will be for home-cooked food. This desire is so basic that it is almost unchangeable, despite the availability and attraction for outside food.

**S:** How do you know this?

**A:** Recently Raghu and Ganga attended a global conference in Turin, Italy organised by Terra Madre Foundation working on organic food. Research scientists and cooks from 150 countries attended the conference. Everyone was interested to know how *dabawalas* transport homemade food so efficiently

everyday for years. Raghu and Ganga acquainted themselves creditably with their presentation.

**S:** What else?

**A:** The Italian government is not only proud of their traditional food and agriculture; it also cares about these issues. They have decided not to support the use of chemical fertilisers and seeds in crop cultivation.

**S:** What did Raghu and Ganga learn from delegates at the conference?

**A:** Well, like Indians, Italians adore homemade food. They felt that if Italy uses organic farming to maintain the original taste of wheat, maize and potatoes, we have plenty of scope in India to use the method to preserve our crop heritage. Ganga mentioned that we have lost many traditional varieties of rice due to neglect. He is now thinking of how their interest can be revived in this. As for both of them personally, they have decided not to use chemical fertilisers and foreign seeds.

**S:** The conference seems to have been mutually beneficial. Is there any other connection to our and Italian belief systems?

**A:** Yes, Raghu said that eating homemade food is not merely masticating and swallowing chunks of meat and vegetables. Italians believe like us that homemade food conveys a feeling of affection that gives divine contentment.

**S:** How?

**A:** According to Ganga in the Indian culture, ladies believe cooking for the family is sacred work. Eating is a ceremony of feeding both body and mind and the remembrance of God.

**S:** Yes. The philosophy here is:

*Live with contentment in the way  
God has placed you in; just BE.*

*Its all-pervasive influence created contentment in Maharashtra at one time, in fact a bit too much. The philosophy of being 'content' with whatever one gets as the only thing God wished us to have led to diluting the importance of 'efforts' in man's 'struggle for growth'. The interpretative overemphasis on 'contentment' froze people in a listless state of mind of non-doing.*

*As we get up to leave, Anita requests me to join her next meeting with Raghu and Ganga. I agree to this with pleasure.*

**A:** At the end of every meeting, I shall record on my laptop the theme, the essence of our discussion. Let me show you what I am entering today:

*Food prepared with affection at home  
provides divine contentment*

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

In the last 25–30 years, people have become habituated to eating outside food for lunch, out of necessity, convenience or fashion.

*Current Opportunity*

With increased health consciousness and the basic preference for home-cooked food, there is an opportunity to start newer, cost effective delivery services.

---





## Chapter 2

**W**e meet at Raghu and Ganga's small one-room office in Dadar, which is a popular middle class district in Mumbai. It is also a major railway junction.

After exchanging greetings Raghu starts from where he left off in last meeting with Anita.

**R:** Our error rate is one in 16 million transactions. We have clocked in a six sigma performance (99.999999%) despite having no technological backup. Our turnover is INR 50 crores (500 million Rupees). Every *dabawala* is a shareholder in our Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust.

**A:** It can be said that all of you are self-employed. You work under the aegis of the Trust, which was formed for a common cause; neither is there a employer-employee relationship, nor is it a cooperative society.

**G:** Correct. We work as a team, and are fully aware that we are dependent on each other. Unless the team works smoothly, we cannot earn our living. This is why we have no strike record.

**A:** What is your code of discipline?

**R:** No alcohol during work hours. Everyone must wear a Gandhi cap during duty hours and carry identity cards. Punctuality is a necessity. No *dabawala* is allowed to undercut or outsmart his colleague.

**A:** How do you settle complaints and grievances between *dabawalas*?

**G:** The group leader, called *Mukadam*, sorts them out. The president or vice-president of the Association looks into issues that are not resolved by the *Mukadam* or the issues between the *Mukadam* and the group.

**A:** Would you tell us how you run the Association?

**R:** There is a Governing Council consisting of 13 members. This includes the president, vice-president, general secretary, treasurer, and nine directors (see Figure A.1). Below that, we have the group leaders (*Mukadams*) who manage the 5000 members of the society. We follow the guidelines laid down in the Cooperative Society Act.

**A:** How are the responsibilities allocated?

**G:** The president or the vice-president is responsible for conducting monthly meetings, checking the bank accounts and solving the problems of members.

*The general secretary handles daily matters of the Trust, the association correspondence, collecting the Trust fee (Rs.15) from members, and looks after all other administration matters.*

*The treasurer maintains the accounts of the Trust.*

*The directors help the president in decision-making and in the smooth functioning of the Trust.*



*If there are any disputes about the overall functioning, they are resolved by the governing council.*

**A:** What does the *Mukadam* do?

**G:** A *Mukadam* is a leader of a group of 25–30 *dabawalas*. Each *Mukadam* has multiple responsibilities, namely, sorting out tiffin boxes at the hub, maintaining a record of payments, arranging substitutes for absent *dabawalas*, settling disputes, scouting for new customers and ensuring customer satisfaction.

**A:** That means he is responsible for business development and continuance, as well as customer satisfaction.

**R:** That is correct. Each *dabawala* is an entrepreneur.

**A:** How?

**G:** We have 120 groups as of now. Each group is independent of the others on all matters. The *Mukadam* and his group are supposed to generate their own revenue and manage day-to-day functioning, including arranging for substitutes.

**R:** The logic behind such a system is to improve its competitiveness. The group is a strategic business unit (SBU).

**S:** Don't forget that Raghu is a commerce graduate, and knows the elements of management.

*Anita acknowledges this with a smile.*

**S:** Raghu's father was the first to lead the *dabawalas*. He appears to have learnt a few things from him as well.

**R:** Yes, passion from father; tolerance, optimism, and love from mother. We remember what *Sant* Tukaram said:

*Dnyandev rachile paya, Tuka zalase kalas*

Dnyandev laid the foundation, Tukaram built the pinnacle.

**S:** That is to say, our fathers laid the foundation on the philosophy of *Sant* Dnyandev; we built our organization, and it symbolises the pinnacle of growth.

**A:** How do the groups work together?

**R:** They collaborate to get new clients. Knowing the geography of operational areas, they share information on clients. This is competitive collaboration.

**A:** Indeed, this is unique. How do you achieve it?

**R:** The common thread is the delivery end. It leads to cutting edge performance by each *dabawala*. Although the performance of *dabawalas* depend upon team performance there is scope for individual initiative. That from customer angle is measured by whether or not the *daba* is delivered on time. Therefore the *dabawala* who delivers has to exercise extra skill and effort to convert the process into the deliverable. What you call in cricketering terminology "the slog over performance".

**S:** This is an excellent collaboration between deliverables and group effort. No single *dabawala* will succeed in achieving his target without the cooperation of his group and chain.

**R:** We have a system where if a member is absent, other members or a substitute takes care of his work. It's like a cricket team. The field is demarcated according to the players. However the overlaps are managed depending on the flow of the game, not on the territorial considerations. Occasional mixing takes place, but that is accidental and that is a given in any game.

**A:** It requires a mindset of shared responsibilities, and the principle of not allowing the team performance to drop.

**G:** The cardinal principle is that the *daba* (tiffin box) has got to be delivered on time. The race has to be won in three hours every day, no excuses. It is a sacred duty to ensure that the customer does not go without his home food. What a disappointment if he were to do so!

**R:** We have improved interpersonal cooperation. However, problems do occur. In a massive network they are bound to, and we sort them out. In a way, our teams are leaderless. Team work is the quintessence of our success.

**G:** There is a saying, which you probably know:

*Hatachi pachuch bote hajaro kame kartat;  
Karan tyanchyat aeekya aste*

**R:** This means that the five fingers of a palm can do a thousand things because they have unity. We cite this to our members all the time.

**A:** What do you mean by leaderless teams?

**R:** Normally, charge hands, supervisors, managers and group leaders are appointed first. It is then their responsibility to recruit teams. We didn't start like that. The emergence of *Mukadam* was a coequal evolution with business.

**A:** How?

**R:** Depending upon the growth, some people come forward from the existing group. One of them takes on the additional responsibility of a *Mukadam*. From their native places they bring recruits as the need arises. In this sense we say that we have leaderless teams.

**A:** I see. What else have you done to maintain your performance over the years?

**R:** We use cycles. We cannot afford to use motorized vehicles, because that will increase the cost for our customers. With the new high speed engines and greater number of trains introduced every year, the momentum has to be kept up. We have found a way by maximizing our collection speed to match the increased speed of trains.

**A:** I understand.

**R:** We had to consciously improve each *dabawala's* speed of collection. He has learnt to literally sprint through the streets on foot. We had no choice but to compete with technological advancements with human effort.

**A:** Even in a situation with no choice, you have the freedom to think anew. What did you get in the bargain?

**G:** Everything is not assessed monetarily. Greater physical effort tires us but we get the satisfaction that we have not saddled the customer with avoidable costs. The added bonus for us is that we sleep sounder! A small change in our working has led to multiple satisfactions.

**A:** How?

**R:** The customer is not only satisfied, he is happy. The business value to the customer is efficient service at a bearable cost. We have not created any pollution or congestion in the city, so the public is happy. We do not cause accidents or take out protest marches to fulfil our demands. No special police force is deployed to manage us.

**S:** That is something; an invisible cost burden is not loaded on to the state apparatus and public.

*With a mischievous look, Ganga says: Ours is a liberal society, and everyone is at liberty to misuse that, but we don't.*

**G:** *Nyaya nitine milava paisa, kadhi rikame basu naka  
Balapani je kasht sosale, janeev tyachi visaru naka II*

**S:** This means:

*Never ever sit idle, earn money with justice and ethical propriety;*

*Retain your awareness of hardships that you faced in childhood II.*

*The emphasis here is on the manner in which you earn money, not forgetting what you have gone through.*

**R:** When we see this pluralistic satisfaction of ours, we naturally feel more than happy. We have enhanced our skills, management techniques and approach to the objectives of our enterprise. This has given us better results and greater customer satisfaction.

**A:** That is bliss.

She types in her laptop:

*If you change just enough, you achieve  
embrasive happiness*

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

Although we talk about the need for change, we undertake few disciplined self-change programmes. As a result the others, viz. colleagues, customers, friends, family members all suffer. The vicious circle of who should change first leads to an epidemic of unhappiness.

*Current Opportunities*

If you change a little bit and treat everyone as your customers (including the government) you would spread happiness. You would substantially contribute to civic well being if you do not dirty public places or participate in protest marches, *bandhs*, *rasta rokos*, etc. The latter require the government to deploy police and other state machinery to manage such disturbances. *Dabawalas* have shown how to internalise change and serve the other to create pervasive happiness.

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## Chapter 3

**N**ext day, until tea is served we chat about current topics of interest. We watch as Raghu and Ganga weave a rich and colourful tapestry of a happening city.

**A:** Roadside vendors sell eatables of all varieties. Fast food chains and restaurants have sprung up all over the city. Don't they compete with you? Doesn't it worry you?

**R:** No, madam. We have a niche of our own. We do not see any of them as our competitors, as they prepare food. We are not in the business of preparing food; we only deliver. There is no meal delivery service of our type in the city; we have the monopoly. We have also started providing delivery to schools.

**S:** Not seeing any of the eateries as competitors is a fundamental assumption that keeps *dabawalas* focused on their basic business of delivery. This "seeing differently" is the hallmark of creative artists and the best of leaders.

**G:** Listen, sahib, the cost of home-cooked food is just Rs. 8, as compared to between Rs. 18–120 charged by good restaurants. In our case, the major portion of Rs. 8 is the delivery charge paid to the *dabawala* and the remainder is for the actual food. We are hence not afraid of any competition.

**A:** It is a low cost delivery service.

**R:** That is not the only reason. We consider ourselves entrepreneurs, not employees. All *dabawalas* are shareholders. We have never gone on strike despite occasional irritation from police or public. We have no hierarchy. We have a great deal of decentralization. Each group is free to solicit new business, provided they have the capacity to mobilize resources.

**A:** What about earning and incentives?

**R:** Everybody earns more or less the same, i.e. Rs. 5000–6000 per month. An integral component of our work is physical labour. Given the design of our delivery system, not every *dabawala* has to put in equal time and effort. There is neither any financial incentive nor disincentive. We do not sack people. Each *dabawala's* fortune is linked to the success of total operations.

**A:** Could you please elaborate further?

**G:** A senior *dabawala* may undertake the task of only sorting at the hubs; whereas the junior's task involves a lot of legwork, like collection, loading, unloading, and delivery. This arrangement is a leveller. It helps forge equal relationships among all the members.

**A:** What about responsibility towards the customer?

**R:** Each *dabawala* is solely responsible for delivery to his 30–35 clients and has complete control over his route. We have no separate responsibility centres for

delivery and service like you folks have. As we said earlier, our bottom line is that no customer should be deprived of his food.

**S:** FedEx delivers worldwide; here, they deliver Mumbai-wide. The former is global; the latter local. The principles for obtaining commitment by linking individual stakes to the success of enterprise are the same in both cases.

**G:** We come from the same geographical region, and work and live in clans. There is no dilution of service culture.

**R:** We mind our own business and do not interfere with others. Neither the current vendors nor new entrants worry us. We are beyond fear as we are in a God-given business and not in competition with anybody. Timely delivery, courteous behaviour, and understanding the special needs of a customer form the basis of our business durability.

**A:** How do you get new customers?

**G:** The harder you hold on to old customers, the quicker you find new ones. More than 3000 clients have stayed with our service for over two decades. We are secure in looking for new customers in the old locales, because the old don't give way to new that fast. In addition, the movement in the direction of new residential complexes and business districts helps us to find new customers.

**R:** A student translated a Marathi piece for me, which I shall read out to you:

*If you soar in space, the stars enthrall you*

*If you dive deep to the bottom of the ocean,  
pearls mesmerise you*

*While daydreaming, you mustn't forget*

*You are able to so visualise because you are standing  
firm on mother earth.*

**G:** We are not afraid of competition. We remain earthy.

**R:** You will appreciate that customer solidarity is built on shared economic gain.

Anita's fingers race on her laptop:

***When you move beyond the fear of new entrants  
and competition, you feel free in your belief  
in God that he will provide new customers***

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

Few business leaders ask the basic question, “What business are we in?” Consequently they get drawn into unrelated lines of business, for which they have neither the feel nor the expertise.

Most of the organizations, whether in private, public or cooperative sectors, run on the lines of a master-servant relationship. The employees do not have a stake in the organization’s survival, and thus do not develop entrepreneurial skills or passion.

*Current Opportunities*

In order to remain on firm ground, shrewd business leaders test fundamental assumptions about the nature of their business. The question they ask is, “Are we staying close to our area, or are we straying into territory where we have no vision, knowledge, data, or competency?” Such thinking defines the boundaries of their business and makes them fearless about competition.

When the organization is set up on the principle that everybody is a shareholder; the passion, the commitment and responsibility for developing business in cooperation with other groups increases.

---





## Chapter 4

**T**he Dadar office is a bit crowded, so we wait outside. Someone notices us and passes the information inside. Ganga gets everybody out to make room for us when he comes to know of this.

**A:** We could have waited until you finished your meeting.

**R:** This was not a scheduled meeting. They just dropped by with some minor grievances; the real reason was just to hang out. They were going home after returning *dabas*.

**A:** The other day you were saying that it is safer to look for new business where there already are old customers, rather than merely look at new territories, correct?

**R:** Even though you find many things have changed dramatically, essential aspects of the human condition have remained remarkably same over time.

**G:** Nonetheless, this is an area where we can do better. We have not approached the problem systematically, as some students have pointed out, especially after the railway network has expanded into *Navi Mumbai* (New Bombay).

**R:** Yes, that observation is correct. One, our search is primarily restricted to areas where the railway network is available and people like homemade food. That helps us to change our course only marginally. Second, we were not serving school children earlier, but have started because many eateries are springing up all over Mumbai, and parents don't want their children to eat the roadside stuff.

**G:** We have also started carrying *dabas* from *khanavals*—small hotels which only serve lunch and dinner.

**R:** And messes that provide special meals for their customers, like low calorie diet for diabetics, etc

**A:** Anything else?

**R:** We do not do systematic surveys to identify new opportunities, or build human resources back in the villages we have come from.

**A:** Which are these villages?

**R:** Akola, Rajgurunagar, Ambegaon, Junnar, Malshi and such places in Mavla *prant* (province), between Lonavala and Pune in Maharashtra. Our ancestors used to climb forts and hills of 500–600 feet in a single breath with just one command from the illustrious Maratha king, Chhatrapati Shivaji.

**G:** Although we are proud of our brave heritage, we lost our swords, and we have come to this stage of carrying food for people. Another problem we face is that



the younger generation wants to get education and do jobs requiring less menial effort.

**A:** The society has to provide employment for the category of people you serve.

**R:** That is exactly what we do. Our way of life induces us to be plain and contented with what we do.

**G:** Knowing our limitations, we have to create an exclusive space.

**R:** By agitating, we would have increased the cost for the customers, and killed the goose that lays golden eggs. It would have instantly deprived 5000 people of their livelihood.

**A:** Like the mill workers who brought on themselves the catastrophe of mill closures.

**S:** The *dabawalas* seem to have intuitively understood the economics of demand and supply; that alternative avenues are available to customers for satisfying their demands, and there is limited utility of their strengths and skills. The mill workers and their leaders did not understand these basics.

**R:** Most people have to leave their homes early in the morning to reach their business districts on time by train. That makes it hard for them to carry tiffins with them, and that too in overcrowded trains. We have honed our skills to meet that need.

**G:** We do it in that limited morning time period.

**A:** Is this model viable for other cities?

**R:** Yes, like Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bangalore, and Hyderabad where large population and lengthy commuting are common features. However, they need to take into account whether there is a reliable transport network like in Mumbai.

**A:** Transportation is vital to the management of the supply chain.

**R:** Madam, what is this new management?

**A:** It's not new. Supply Chain Management (SCM) is the process of planning, implementing, and controlling operations with the aim of satisfying customer requirements as efficiently as possible. It encompasses all activities involved in sourcing, procurement, conversion, and logistics. It focuses on the optimization of the activities in the supply chain with a view to transporting the finished product using various modes of transportation to distribution centres, and ultimately to customers. It is end-to-end efficient service.

**R:** But our product is only 'delivery'.

**S:** Partially correct. In your 'delivery supply chain', you collect *dabas* from various customer homes, and then transport them on foot, bicycles, and pushcarts to railway station hubs, like Thane. They are distributed there according to destinations, and at the destinations again redistributed according to offices. They are then delivered to the customers' offices. You follow

the method in reverse to collect and return the *dabbas* to the respective residences.

**R:** Yes, we manage the movement of our goods using the railway network...

**S:** ...which means you manage the logistics and transportation from source points to different destinations and back, within the stipulated time, every day. Your product therefore is 'delivery on time with an error rate of almost zero' — one in 16 million! You have been able to establish this excellent record without punching any time clock or supervision. It's an unbelievable feat of people groups in timely service delivery.

**G:** The main reason why we have lasted is our organic growth. It is brought about by our strong cultural moorings.

**A:** Any one wanting to replicate the model must have these prerequisites. An entrepreneur will not succeed by launching a venture that employs people from the street. It is also not for some enthusiastic social worker or ideologue to throw herself into doing something for the unemployed poor. There has to be an efficient railway network and a committed group of people sharing the same value set. And the value set is of supreme importance, make no mistake about that.

**S:** Any other example, from courier services?

**A:** Post office and Blue Dart are both courier services, but the fundamental difference between them and the *dabawalas* is the consideration of cost burden on

customers. In India, the postal service is still not privatized. It is heavily subsidised and the government is trying to find ways of raising revenue through some commercial approaches. Blue Dart is in the high technology area. In both examples, there is an employer-employee relationship, not like the *dabawalas* who are all shareholders.

**S:** That's correct.

**A:** When you are threatened with extinction because of changed circumstances, your basic survival instincts teach you to compromise with certain systemic constraints.

**S:** Such basics have a strong component of a philosophical outlook, which teaches how to mitigate hardships and retain sanity. It is again an issue of mindset.

**R:** Our model could be copied only if the person can first build cultural cohesiveness on a well-grounded philosophy. We are fortunate, in that it is inherent in our upbringing and in our kind of environs. Those wanting to replicate this will have to put in a tremendous amount of hard work to develop such a mindset.

**S:** That sure is the seed capital you bring to the table.

**R:** That is our sweat equity.

**S:** The beauty of your system is that one out of 5000 *dabawalas* makes a mistake only once every two months, i.e. one error in every 16 million deliveries (including the return journey) that involve no

documentation. This makes it a one of its kind supply chain in the world. Your 'critical-to-quality' process capability in delivery of *dabas* is outstanding, because you are harnessing only human competencies in your chain of operations. Quality and durability go together. What is durable in your business?

**R:** The need for homemade lunch.

**A:** I got it.

*Search what is durable in times of major change;  
It provides the wildest of business opportunities.*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

A large number of business leaders do not study the supply-demand market economics. When massive waves of change hit the market, they crumble. They fail to forecast changing scenarios and what would be durable in such situations.

Very few organizations study their supply chain management practices. Such study from procurement of raw materials to finished product show many on-line variables are outsourced in this logistically interdependent world. It identifies the gaps that need to be met for timely delivery.

*Current Opportunities*

Leaders with vision are constantly looking out for trends so as to keep their bread and butter lines of business intact. They are focused on finding what is durable in times of change. They act upon strengthening their niche areas with constant innovation.

Organizations that have an end-to-end broad perspective of their supply chain management are able to do a lot of cost-cutting and quality improvement in deliverables.

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# DABAWALAS



## Chapter 5

**G:** *Sahib*, what do you want to know today?

**A:** Does your delivery and coding system function on a uniform basis?

**R:** Yes. It's a kind of baton relay system, wherein *dabas* are handed over by *dabawalas* at various points in the hub and spoke delivery process. The sorting is done at specific railway junctions, from where individual spokes branch out for distribution. Hubs are places for sorting *dabas*.

**G:** And also for sorting out conflicts between *dabawalas*, and between groups! It's like platforms in the share market.

**A:** How did you design the system?

**R:** There was no model for us to follow. We developed the system on our own, with the single purpose of delivering the *dabas* on time.

**A:** Have you not computerised it?

**R:** No, where is the need? When we can do it by hand, why use a machine? Two principles are involved, sir: One, the cost to the customer must not unnecessarily increase, which would have happened if we installed computers. Second, while we can learn computer

operations sufficient for our requirements, why displace the available labour?

**G:** A student recently told us that in a survey conducted in America, it was found that most people think they can do without those endless meetings, pointless emails, and dozens of buying options and channel selection on TV.

**S:** What he means is, you do not do things out of context; or things that overburden the beneficiaries. This means acting 'local'.

**A:** It benefits the customers and generates employment for the semi-literate. A noble cause is served well.

**G:** Absolutely true, madam.

**A:** What about the sorting process?

**R:** With an increasing number of customers, the sorting process at the hubs was likely to become time-consuming. We decided to decentralize the coding system at the group level. Each group was free to develop its own coding, based on simple, identifiable numbers and signs.

**A:** What was the differentiating factor?

**R:** A distinctive colour code. Each group chose its own colour from a spectrum of the seven primary colours.

**A:** Could you show us the coding key?

*Raghu opens his presentation file, and shows the three exhibits, given in the Appendix.*

*Looking at these, Anita says: Each daba is picked up from a client's residence by a dabawala, placed on a cycle or a wooden trolley pushcart and taken to the nearest of 68 railway stations and loaded on the train. This is the Collection phase.*

*The second set of dabawalas sort out dabas at the hubs according to destination. These are then placed in the destination-specific wooden carts and loaded on the train in 30 seconds, the time for which it halts at each station. Trains arrive at two-minute intervals. The hub is a crucial link in the delivery system. It is essentially a central station like Bandra, Kurla, Andheri, Dadar. This is the Unloading-Sorting-Reloading phase.*

*The third set of dabawalas unload the dabas at the destination centres, re-sort according to the locations assigned to specific delivery routes, and then deliver the dabas to the clients. This is Unloading-Sorting-Delivery phase.*

*After lunch, they pick up the empty dabas and go through the same route on the return journey to deliver them home. This is Return-Pick-up phase.*

*The exact combination of dabawalas used every day may vary with the volume and density of traffic, but they remain the same for the return routes.*

**A:** Have I understood it correctly?

**G:** Yes. You have to bear in mind that we work with minute precision to get that three hour space for business in the morning. We have to manage within the

strict timetables of railways and offices. We have created a world record in time management.

**A:** All eatables, even those that are refrigerated, have a certain shelf life. Similarly, in retaining the freshness of home-cooked food, temperature plays an important role. You deliver the food within that time, approximately 3–4 hours from the time of cooking.

**S:** I suppose these days, offices have microwaves. Also, modern lunch boxes can keep food hot for a longer time. Irrespective of such facilities, these fellows have maintained the schedule. This is ultimate excellence in decentralization and time management.

**G:** No organization can function effectively without unity, discipline, sacrifice, and awareness of one's limitations.

Anita cannot hide her joy at finding a modern management mantra that conveys a sense of purpose rarely seen in the best professional organizations.

Anita reads what she records on her laptop:

*Decentralise to empower and deliver  
with excellence;  
Ensure that the cost of change is least  
to the customer*

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

The work in any business organization consists of endless meetings, emails, telephone calls, and many avoidable irritants, combined with the clutter of mechanization and computerization. The resultant service product at the low end of the technological structure is neither very efficient nor cost effective to the customer.

Most organizations have centralised decision-making for resource allocation and business development. This leads to deskilling of employee capabilities, apart from lowering their motivation to complete tasks independently.

*Current Opportunities*

What can be done without the use of mechanical aids needs to be done by hand, if in this way we can maintain reasonable employment levels at the low end of technology. We need not import every work practice from abroad. Think global about efficiency through automation and computerization, but act local to increase efficiency through creative efforts like *dabawalas* using cycles instead of mopeds.

Decentralise to empower and deliver your product at minimum cost to the customer. If you have a mindset

based on the Gandhian model of interdependent co-creation, where machine comes next to man, it is possible to provide cost effective service to the customers. You have to ensure that the operating human system is not corrupted by the selfishness of a single man.

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## Chapter 6

**T**he next morning, Raghu and Ganga go through the tapes with great interest while drinking chai. They pick up the conversation from the last line “Decentralise to empower and deliver with excellence”. This is the translation of their conversation in Marathi.

**G:** *Yaar* Raghu, these guys seem to be intelligent. They appear to sympathise with us.

**R:** Not sympathise; empathise.

**R:** This decentralization is a big issue with these companies. The companies, the media, the press, everybody lectures the government to decentralize and yet managers in many of these organizations are crying for decentralization and delegation, forget power sharing.

**G:** What was the quotation that the student in Lucknow told us at our seminar?

Raghu looks through some files and quotes:

*There is no structural organization of society,  
which can bring about the coming of the kingdom of  
God on earth,  
since all systems can be perverted by the selfishness  
of man.*

**G:** I still don't quite understand why they need so much power.

**R:** Because in that constellation, there is control, profit, and authority at the top to decide the fate of all stakeholders.

**G:** Oh, is that the reason why some of them become so power drunk? But why take so much responsibility and earn brickbats from everyone, then attend stress management seminars and be unhappy?

**R:** No pain, no gain! If that does not happen, how will psychiatrists and pharmaceutical companies prosper? The new crop of MBAs has been trained to first complicate things, then spend time and money in making them simple, and that too with the aid of computers. They say the technological civilization is by its very nature, complex, and requires creativity to solve the problems.

**G:** I think it first requires greater creativity to make them complex! I would not send my son for MBA even if he does well in all examinations. It puts him in an incubator that tutors him to become a complex human being, who runs after all the glittering status symbols. What kind of a system is this? And on job they go to find out his satisfaction index! Weird, isn't it?

**R:** Well, that's the way the 'creative' people make the world work. First, build an infrastructure of attitudes uncongenial to human development. Next, pass its cost on to the society. Then spend again on mindset



change programmes, the cost of which is swiftly loaded on to the products. This is then sold to the gullible customers by putting hoardings that declare, “Customer is the King”.

**G:** I haven’t seen one proclaiming, “Customer is the Queen”.

*Winking, Raghu says: That require Ganga’s “different seeing” ability.*

**G:** There are so many hassles in getting things done from others. We think:

*Sattepeksha Siddhant, Swarthapeksha Seva  
Lobhapeksha Samarpanas mahtva dyave*

**S:** This means,

*You should give more importance to: Axiom  
than Positional Power, Service rather than  
Selfishness,*

*Sublime Submission rather than Greed*

**R:** That is true, but the power and sense of achievement in running large, complex and technologically savvy organizations is great. The world would not have progressed without the advancement of science and technology.

**G:** That also is correct. The general progress that we see everywhere would not have come otherwise.

**R:** Ganga *yaar*, look at it this way. If people and the world don’t change, everything will become stale. We

cannot go back to village life, can we? There aren't enough resources to generate enough income to feed a family of five. What is the mainstay of our income?

**G:** Railways and the craze for homemade food.

**R:** Correct. Bullock carts would not have provided us this kind of income. The advent of the railways was a boon. The improvement in engines, greater capacity, and better facilities help us to cope with the increased traffic.

**G:** I see.

**R:** From our fathers' generation, we have had customers who needed homemade food, and this is now fulfilled by an efficient railway network. We are only the couriers.

**G:** We are obliged to both for providing us a vocation that enables us to utilize our skills. The age-old habit of having homemade food is sustained by modern means of transport.

**R:** We are able to build this business because we also changed with the times. The previous generation didn't run as fast as us, because in those days the trains didn't run as fast as they do today. The momentum in Mumbai has gone sky high in the last 30 years.

**G:** I understand. We increased our speed to cope with the increase in the speed of trains. We formed more groups as the load increased, changed our collection and coding systems. And we did all this willingly.

**R:** Why?

**G:** Because it spelled hope.

**R:** When we enthusiastically improve skills we can legitimately hope for a better future. Ganga, how would you summarise like Madam?

**G:** Simple.

*Savour the old but enjoy the changing*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

In the current scenario, the mortality of organizations is high because many times the people there do not change their ways. They continue past practices even when the ground reality changes drastically.

*Current Opportunities*

Organizations that survive this change are those where people are prepared to learn new techniques and skills to enhance their levels of competence. They cherish the old methods, but embrace new ways of doing things.

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## Chapter 7

**N**ext morning, Anita accompanies Raghu and Ganga to see their operations. I join them for lunch at Chetana restaurant, in south Mumbai.

**G:** Madam, how did you find our morning *sharyat* (race) with time?

**A:** Quite an experience! I wonder how you all do it, day after day, for so many years! I can imagine why it is rated a record of sorts. You do all this to earn just enough to subsist; and yet you are so happy in what you do. Seeing your untiring effort humbles me.

**R:** Not that we do not need more money; we do. But we are acutely aware of the middle class mindset. Some crib, and some cannot afford to pay higher charges.

**A:** So when do you get a raise?

**R:** It doesn't come automatically. We are able to hike our charges only when we can show how our expenses have gone up, by pointing to the cost of living index. When the customers themselves experience the pinch, we get the raise. We have to persuade our customers to empathise, and that is a skill our members possess in decent measure. This is the quality that has kept us in business for so long.

**A:** Must be very difficult.

**G:** Yes. Our society is still deeply emotional. Empathy pays; not aggressive selling. If you can access the sentimental part skilfully, you will get your due.

**A:** Mr. Megde, what you are essentially conveying is, search for what is durable in the process of change.

**R:** Madam, now you know us so well, it's ok to call us by our names, Raghu and Ganga. That is more homely.

**A:** All right, Raghu.

**R:** Habits don't change so easily, right?

**A:** Yes.

**G:** Similarly, values like honesty, integrity, and belief in God don't change easily. Do they?

**A:** No, but cultures do.

**R:** Yes, but they change very slowly. What we are saying is to look out for the durable and the lasting aspects, and you might spot opportunities to conduct business using simple methods.

**A:** These people have moved from villages to the city and made it their home. They have changed just to the extent necessary for business, but they have not left their traditions.

**S:** Remember the movie 'Fiddler on the Roof'?



**A:** That's what I mean. These people have firmly held on to their ancestral values. It has resulted in a unique tradition of service.

Raghu and Ganga have a smile on their face for the apt quotation on 'tradition'

*Tradition! Tradition! With tradition comes comfort in the way you do things, knowing that this is how it has always been and how it always will be. The hero, Tevye has to face his fears as his daughters place him in positions that make him choose between tradition or their happiness.*

*When all settles, everyone will give the person they love what they want and with this Tevye begins to change. He is constantly fighting with what he, his wife and his peers feel are the basis of Jewish life. This is where I believe the fiddler on the roof comes in. Tevye can always look toward the fiddler and find solace in his music. When he does, he knows he is not alone and no matter what his path, the fiddler will always be there to comfort him. Tradition!*

*This underlines what they wanted to communicate.*

**G:** Everybody doesn't have to be in a mad rush. On the expressway, there are three lanes—one for slow, the other for medium, and the third for high speed vehicles. Business opportunities can be found in all lanes.

**R:** Look at it like this. Habits are the stabilisers of life. They require maintenance, which means regular service. This again means that the service providers must

cultivate the habit of providing such service with religious regularity. “Mother’s recipes” sell, but it is not the same thing as eating a dish made by mother. It is her touch that we savour, isn’t it?

**A:** No matter how many gizmos or how much automation you provide; at the bottom of the hierarchy of human needs, people require cost effective service. What they are saying is that you disturb the equilibrium at that personal level when you make everything quick, dependent on technology and machines; and on top of it, expensive. You think of your ROI (Return on Investment) and load the cost on the user.

**S:** Correct. In the process, you lose your independence and weaken the human spirit.

**A:** According to C. K. Prahalad, for the profit-driven businesses there are opportunities to improve the results engaging people at the bottom of the pyramid. There is scope to make them believe the marketing doctrine, “More is better”.

**S:** However, in the *dabawalas*’ business model there are two significant differences. One, they are not making the customer want more in order to create business. Second, their driver is not profit but subsistence, plus a little margin.

**R:** We understand the difference between need and extravagance.

**S:** The culture of globalization has confused speed with greater accomplishments. We are coerced to run.

The premise of this philosophy is the belief that if we do more of everything quickly, we will be branded successful. We will have arrived. In the process, we miss the pulse of living. We can regain this through slowing down. That's what *yoga* is all about. The tools for practice of *yoga* are *pranayam* and walking.

**R:** You got it right, sir! We are constantly walking. We belong to the *varkari panth*, the pilgrims who consider life to be a pilgrimage.

**A:** What does '*varkari panth*' mean?

**R:** The motto of our sect is:

*Instead of becoming a pearl in the golden ring*

*We prefer to be a dewdrop and satisfy the  
thirst of a swan*

*The joy we get is eternal*

**A:** What is the philosophy behind this practice?

Ganga reads from his pocket notebook:

*Animals and trees are fortunate*

*They get real satisfaction in serving others!*

**S:** The philosophy is co-existence. You live and let others live. There is no exploitation. You can replace one societal balance with another, marginally better one. But you ensure not to disturb the equilibrium.

**A:** What is inspiring is that they have put their belief system into practice in their business.

**S:** The folks living at the bottom of the pyramid have found space in the economic wisdom of marginal utility. They changed enough to improve their speed, so that they could cope with the speed of trains, but not so much as to disturb their balance. Theirs is a daily *padyatra*, a practice that has lasted for over a hundred years! The sprinting innovation provides true service to people.

**A:** Earlier there were trams in Mumbai and the trains also were slower. They began with servicing Girgaum, Niagaum, Mazgaon and part of Gamdevi districts. These were close to the only business district of those days, Fort in south Mumbai.

**S:** I see. It gained momentum as speedier engines were pressed into service. The number of trains and routes has increased. Services have extended up to 70 kms north of the main business district. In other words, there is tremendous growth in business and residential areas.

**A:** If speed is the seed capital for business at the top end of value chain, it is so at the bottom end too, factored by the rate of change in technology. What they have shown is that in the marathon of newer models of train engines, there is scope for a Peoples' Express—a kind of marathon for people to earn a living with extra human effort.

**S:** In his best seller *Who Moved My Cheese*, what Spencer Johnson essentially conveys is that the ability not only to accept change but to create it is the mark of

a dynamic individual. Here you see the *dabawalas* internalising change to retain their business. They did not move much, because their cheese (viz. delivery clusters of home-cooked food) had not moved much.

**G:** We have to sprint to catch the Andheri local.

The waiter brings the *paan* we had ordered. As we get up to leave, Anita enters:

*sprinters@bottomofpyramid.com*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

In the competitive world, everybody is in a race to win, which has made the work-life rhythm go hay-wire. The stress levels have gone up, causing health hazards for large sections of people.

Services have become prohibitive in cost, unreliable, and inefficient for customers at the middle and bottom of the social pyramid. This is because of the excessive use of modern gadgetry, excessive consideration of ROI and above all the indifferent attitude of the personnel in most organizations.

*Current Opportunities*

We are born to win, but not born to race all the time. Everybody doesn't have to drive fast on the express-way. You can learn to sprint rather than walk to make speedy deliveries.

In the hierarchy of human needs, a cost-effective and affordable service is of prime importance, when we are sandwiched by high unemployment rates and an aging population. The huge demand for such services can be met by adopting a customer-centric approach based on the principle of subsistence and not profit, with a strong *Seva Dharma* value set.

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## Chapter 8

*sprinters@bottomofpyramid.com* proved to be my lullaby that night. I told this to Anita when she picked me up the next morning to go to the Andheri office of the *dabawalas*, and she was pleased. Raghu and Ganga were waiting for us.

**R:** Sir, we enjoyed the lunch the other day. Your questions made us think quite a bit. We went over them again in the train on the return journey to see if we had given the correct answers.

**A:** Did you?

**R:** Yes, we did. Many times we do not understand complicated things, so we reflect on them. We have to explain many things to our members. We can do so only if we are able to simplify complex phenomena.

**A:** Could you please give an example?

**R:** Once I explained a concept to a group: In a machine there are some moving parts and some stationary ones. The stationary parts also require periodic maintenance. Similarly, human beings have some needs that change rarely and some that change fast. Servicing the least changing needs provides us with our livelihood. We cannot falter on that.

**G:** The freshness of the home food has to be retained. It is a key factor in the uniqueness of our delivery

system. We cannot collect *dabas* earlier or deliver late. The operation has to be carried out within the three to three and half hours in the morning.

**A:** In such a time bound schedule, you must be facing obstacles of sorts. Could you please tell us how you motivate your members to deliver the *dabas* on time?

**G:** Since our pushcarts move slowly in comparison to other vehicles, we ourselves also create obstacles.

**A:** I suppose you do.

**G:** In the beginning, when we tried to cross the road when the traffic signal was red or amber, the police objected. We had to plead with them to allow us to walk through, so that we do not cause accidents or roadblocks in the fast traffic during green signals.

**A:** What happened?

**G:** Appreciating this perspective and knowing our sincerity in delivering food, the police allowed us to run, or let us say, they ignored our running.

**R:** We exploited this space, which benefited all. The police do not allow such crossing to pedestrians or other pushcarts of vendors.

**S:** Quite imaginative! Anita, they got the concession on empathetic thinking of the police—that the food must reach on time. The police felt the *dabawalas'* cycle of time management had to remain sacrosanct. It is an example of right brain thinking, an intuitive waiver.

**A:** I understand. The police did not use the left-brain logic that would have made them study the speed of all vehicles, the rationale behind each one's business, traffic density and jams, etc. to arrive at the decision. The public also seems not to have appealed for equal treatment. None has filed public interest litigation so far. Remarkable harmony in a socialist country!

**S:** And a pluralist one too!

**R:** Our gurus have told us that we have to go beyond the mind.

**G:** Yes. We have to understand the wavelength of the customers through both brains. Madam, you got it right! The customer is God; never leave him or treat without devotional care.

Anita says: Yes, that's what I am noting—

*The harder you hold on loyally to old customers*

*With a dependable delivery service,  
it provides lasting business.*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

The customer service, whether of mobile phone or washing machine companies, cable operators, or any others, is expensive, time consuming and not very dependable.

*Current Opportunities*

Any company providing service to its customers that sincerely believes the customer is God, will make its service delivery dependable. In so doing, it will win customer loyalty.

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## Chapter 9

**W**e meet at the *dabawala's* ground floor office in *Navyug* Mansion in central Mumbai.

**A:** You have got wide recognition. Would you tell us about it?

**R:** It all began with an article [Fast Food, “*Forbes Global*” October 8, 1998 by Subrata N Chakravarty and Nazneen Karmali] about our efficient and reliable delivery. Read this:

*Mumbai's 'Tiffinwallahs' have achieved a level of service to which Western business can only aspire. "Efficient organization" is not the first thought that comes to mind in India, but when the profit motive is given free rein, anything is possible. To appreciate Indian efficiency at its best, watch the Tiffinwallahs at work.*

**G:** MTV and ZEE TV produced documentaries on us. *Guinness Book of World Records*, and Ripley's *Believe it or not* have a record in our honour: Unbelievable delivery performance at the most affordable cost to customers.

**R:** We did not know anything about the Guinness Book or Ripley's. We do not read English papers; our environment is Marathi. We were pleasantly sur-

prised with such recognition. One feature after another made us popular.

**A:** What did you like most about getting wide coverage in press and media? The business elite of the society also started taking note of your presence and the systematic work you do, didn't they?

**R:** Yes. What is particularly fascinating is that academicians and students have evinced keen interest in our activity. You have seen the studies conducted. Their observations have been of great benefit. We got to know how they work and think, and that's personally very important.

**G:** Speaking for myself, my left brain got hooked on to *<http://www.globalization.com>*

**A:** I appreciate your efforts in trying to find out what globalization means.

**S:** Changing the topic let me ask, did you ask to meet Prince Charles?

**R:** No. He must have seen the BBC documentary or something. We got a call from the British Council. Jitendra Jain introduced himself and said, "The Prince of Wales wants to meet you to understand your operations in his forthcoming visit to Mumbai. I trust you would consider it an honour", and I replied yes.

**G:** There were six of us in our Andheri office at the time. We just couldn't believe it for a while.



**R:** Jitendra called and fixed the appointment. Although it would have been appropriate to meet the Prince at Victoria Terminus (now called Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus), it was not possible for security reasons. Alternately, it was decided to meet at the Western Railway's main office.

**A:** What did the Prince say?

**R:** He evinced keen interest in our operations. He saw the tiffin boxes and asked about the coding system.

**A:** Since he is familiar with the complex system of the London underground he must have quickly grasped how difficult the sorting process and time management are.

**S:** You are right.

**G:** The Prince's visit boosted our morale, and got our brand royal recognition. We became instantly known all over the world. What more could we want from *Vitthal Parmeshwar*?

**A:** This clan worships *Vitthal-Rukhmai* of *Pandharpur* in Maharashtra. But Raghu, you were already known in Mumbai after the *Forbes* article, Guinness, and Ripley's took note of your extraordinary service achievements, isn't it?

**R:** Yes, but a personal visit by the crown prince is no small event. The government never took notice of us before that. Years ago, the public used to tease us as *ghatis*, which means uncultured chaps. How many

would read the magazines in which our stories were featured?

**S:** Did it any way help to increase your business?

**R:** Of course, the business has gone up along with respect for what we do and how we do it.

**A:** What do you think impressed him the most?

**G:** Our record of timely delivery service for over a century.

**S:** Which other famous person have you met, Ganga?

**G:** Sir Richard Branson of Virgin Atlantic Airlines travelled with us. He dressed like us, in *kurta-pyjama*, although the *kurta* was blue. We were told that he won't wear a white Gandhi cap but he actually did. He asked for it.

**A:** What were his questions?

**R:** They were about time management, logistics, and six sigma performance. He was impressed with our answers. We did not know he was so popular until he alighted at the Church gate station. There was a huge crowd to see him.

**A:** Let's meet tomorrow at Hilton Towers.

*Lifelong devotional commitment to timely  
deliverables*

*Brings Royal recognition and increase in business*

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

Bad service brings down the brand value of a company so much that it loses its competitive edge.

*Current Opportunities*

Run your service set-ups, whether in-company or outsourced on the principle of efficient service. Ensure that the mindset of the staff is devotional towards work.

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## Chapter 10

**F**or an evening meeting, the café in the Hilton Towers in downtown Mumbai is a classy venue. The ambience and its view set the mood for another interesting conversation.

**A:** I am eager to know about the invitation you received for the Prince's wedding with Camilla.

**R:** That is an unbelievable and most memorable event in our life. Jitendra Jain called me up and asked how many of us had passports. I replied, "Three; Ganga, Sopan and I". And then he said that we have an invitation for two from the Prince to attend his wedding. I looked at the calendar. It was 1<sup>st</sup> April. I asked, "Sir, today is the first of April. Are you fooling us?", and he said no, and told me to come and see the invitation.

**A:** Did you go?

**R:** Yes. When I saw the letter I couldn't believe my eyes. We were joyous and proud of being invited out of 100 billion Indians. We returned to office and later conveyed our decision that Sopan and I will attend.

**S:** That invitation is certainly a genuine recognition for your clan.

**R:** Correct, we knew that we were being invited as the representatives of all *dabawalas* and accepted it as such. From that moment it was real *laginghai*—a mad

rush to get ready for the wedding! We were accustomed to running everyday; but additional running had to be done between British Council, Taj Mahal Hotel, Air India office and other places.

**A:** Why such rush?

**R:** The invitation was received on April 1, and the wedding was on April 8, which meant we had only six days to prepare. April 8<sup>th</sup> was *amavasya*, not an auspicious day according to our *shastra* (science). We performed *pujas* to ensure that the wedding ceremony passes off peacefully.

**G:** In the meantime, there was news of the Prince's visit to Rome to pay his last respects to the Late Pope Paul. The wedding was rescheduled for April 9, and we got one day more for preparations.

**A:** Raghu, how did you manage to raise money for your journey?

**R:** Air India offered us free tickets. The Taj offered to host our stay at their hotel in London. The British Council paid the tax on our tickets. What more could God shower!

**G:** Knowing that outsiders were taking so much care of us, our *gharwalis* (housewives) were not far behind. They were not sure what kind of food we would get. They made *bhakri* (Marathi *roti* prepared from *bajra*), peanut chutney, *chivada* (spicy rice flakes) and other eatables to ensure that we don't remain hungry.

**S:** Remarkable.

**R:** We then went on a gift-buying spree. For Camilla *vahini* we bought a fine *mangalsutra*. The *mangalsutra* is a necklace with black beads, considered equivalent to a wedding ring in the Indian custom. We also bought a nine yard typical Maharashtrian *Paithani* silk *sari*.

**A:** What about the Prince?

**R:** For him we got a Maharashtrian *pheta* from well known designers in Pune. It is a kind of a hat worn by the naval cadets. It is made of embroidered, striped cloth. In addition, we took a specially designed wedding card for them.

**G:** Raghu's wife made special *teelache laddoo* (granola sweet balls made from sesame seeds). This is a delicacy we make on auspicious occasions.

**R:** This was our second overseas trip. Earlier we had gone to Italy. At the Taj, we were put up in a luxurious suite. But we did not have time to rest. A meeting with the press and media was arranged downstairs. The conference room was packed. Everyone was curious as to why the prince was so fond of us.

**S:** What was your response?

**R:** I narrated a story from the *Mahabharata* about Sudama, Krishna's poor friend. Sudama had gone to Krishna at the instance of his wife, who tells Sudama to ask for his help. Reluctantly, Sudama agrees and

goes to *Dwarka*, Krishna's city. Sudama was awe-struck by the beauty and grandeur of Dwarka. He offers Krishna the few rice flakes he had taken for him, and Krishna gladly accepts. Overwhelmed by his affection and hospitality, Sudama can't do what he had come to do. Returning empty handed from Dwarka, Sudama wonders what to tell his wife.

**A:** What does he tell?

**R:** He could not recognise his wife, or his house, or the village. With his magic Krishna had transmuted the whole place. His wife recognises and welcomes him. She praises him sky high for the gift he got from his friend. Sudama tells her that he had not asked for anything. Both were ecstatic at Krishna's surprising bounty.

**A:** How did you drive home the point?

**R:** I said that unlike Sudama, we do not want anything from the Prince. We came to attend the wedding to express our affection, gratitude, and respect.

**R:** In Marathi, we say:

*Etarankadun aapplepana hava asel tur*  
*Pratham 'Me'pana sodla paahije*  
*Tyatach khara jeevan jagnyacha arth ahe*

**S:** It means—

*If you expect affinity from others*  
*You must first let go of your 'Me'-ness (ego)*  
*In it, you will find the true meaning of living life*



**R:** The questions would not end. The interpreter closed the meeting for us, saying we had to attend the wedding the next morning.

**R:** At sharp 8 o'clock the next morning, Mr. Oliver Brend from the Prince of Wales Charitable Foundation came to pick us up. We drove to Buckingham Palace, where a luxury bus was waiting to take us and other dignitaries to Windsor Castle.

**R:** In the chapel of the castle, the other guests were talking in hushed tones. A smiling lady in Indian dress introduced herself as *Maharani Padmini Devi* of Jaipur, and promised to act as our interpreter. We didn't know how to thank her.

**A:** After the arrival of the wedding couple, the ceremony must have begun.

**R:** Yes. Everybody started reading prayers from the books given to each one. After that, the party began.

**A:** Charles and Camilla must have come round to shake hands.

**R:** He noticed us from a distance and came straight to us. Quickly I said what I had memorised earlier, "Wish you a very happy married life". He thanked us warmly though hurriedly, for our wishes and our gifts. He said that we should convey his regards to the other *dabawalas*. *Padmini Devi* translated this for us, and I was overwhelmed with emotion.

**A:** The prince must have understood your sentiments.

**R:** The Prince also introduced Camilla *vahini* to us, and she also thanked us for the gifts. We just nodded and smiled back. Padmini *Devi* even introduced us to the Queen, and we spoke with her for a few minutes.

**S:** Raghu, you got a chance of a lifetime.

**R:** I felt like it was all a dream. It ended when the Prince and Camilla left.

**S:** Oh, what an experience! You narrated it so well that I felt like I was there on the trip with you.

**R:** The Prince's letter (Figure A.5) to me, after the torrential rains in Mumbai in July 2005, speaks volumes about his concern for us.

**S:** Let us have our last brief meeting in Cooperage *Maidan*.

**A:** I am concluding this from today's discussion:

*At the prince's wedding, affection mysteriously  
leads to bonding*

*Its ethos is local but broad banding is global*

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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

Many organizations make tall claims about their record of exemplary service to customers but real feedback does not support such claims.

*Current Opportunities*

There can be global recognition for an error free durable local service. The local bonding between service providers and clients leads to global bonding. Entrepreneurs, venture capitalists and business leaders all over the world looking for innovative ideas can find a few here.

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## Chapter 11

**R:** After all the discussions, we want to clarify one thing. Please do not think that we see ourselves as know-alls. After coming under public gaze we are careful to see that our business interests do not suffer because of our confidence and upfront talk. One could say that we live by trusting in God, because we do not have solutions to all problems.

**G:** We are also aware that the way we operate may not be applicable in other businesses. However, we do feel that our norms of behaviour and belief system are universally applicable.

**S:** If the elite, academicians, businessmen, scholars, students, press and media have all started taking interest in your accomplishments, there must be something unique behind your success.

**R:** We understand that; hence we cooperate. I want to emphasise, we have not become success blind.

**S:** We appreciate the thought.

**A:** I suppose you know by now that we are eager to study the thought process that has led to your success. We'd like to understand the relationship between material hankering and satisfied living.

**R:** Madam, I need not tell you that ours is essentially a fight between tradition and modernity, men and machines, essential consumption and rampant consumerism.

**A:** Yes that is exactly what got me interested in your story.

**R:** Let me give you an example. We did not do any shopping in London because we felt we get everything here, so there is no need to spend unnecessarily. Our thinking underscores the line we draw between essential consumption and consumerism. The experience we got is invaluable. Sharing it with our families, friends, *dabawalas*, and others is a rare gift than anything else.

Smilingly says Ganga, "And it's duty-free!"

With playful tone Raghu adds, "With the grace of God it is even cost-free!"

**A:** If everybody started adopting your lifestyle and business philosophy, there would be no growth; either of goods or services.

**R:** You are right. That is why we do not say that our model is universally applicable, despite globalisation.

**G:** People must progress to higher income brackets and better standards of living, otherwise societies will stagnate.

**R:** The resultant market depression would be killing.

**S:** I am glad you think so. Remember what a French philosopher once said —

*Civilisations die from excessive development of certain characteristics which had at first contributed to their success.*

**R:** Sir, those doing exceedingly well need to think of issues like success vs. significance and the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

**A:** This applies to nations as well as individuals.

**S:** Since national boundaries have become somewhat irrelevant with globalisation, we have to think more on the level of the individual. In a global village the beginning has to be made by individuals.

**G:** With service orientation...

**R:** If service to others becomes the business of every individual, regardless of whether he is an entrepreneur, billionaire, or common man, there will be a transformation at all levels. That, in our humble opinion, is the hallmark of the 21<sup>st</sup> century mindset, and the answer to the evils of globalisation.

**S:** Correct.

**A:** You take any business; you will find its service department lousy, expensive, and inefficient, even when outsourced. In the seminars they teach “Customer is God” whereas in practice few follow what they preach. The reality doesn’t change. Service remains lousy and cost escalating, exceptions apart.

**S:** If the service segment of the private sector is below standard there is no moral authority for us to shout against government service and public sector undertaking.

After this, Anita and I thanked Raghu and Ganga for the time they had spent with us. Somehow, the words we used did not seem to match our feelings, and I found myself wishing we were as expressive as the other two. But Raghu and Ganga turned back, held our hands again for a while and said, “You don’t show it, but we know you feel like us only”.

At heart, these two are God loving, simple, and sentimental people. Their need for praise, affection and recognition is understandable. We wound up with the feeling that we had met this need well, which is why our rapport and understanding had been so good with them.

Anita punches on her keyboard:

*The success secret of any business is  
To make its service segment humane*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

If you look at the mountains of complaints made by customers receiving any kind of actual service, you realise that service for the most part is impersonal and careless.

*Current Opportunities*

The service sector business has 50% growth potential in the total future economic growth. To realise this, we need to transform our mindset and start providing service that solves customer problems.

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## Chapter 12

**M**y last meeting with Anita was at JW Marriott, Juhu.  
**A:** Uncle, I am really taken with Raghu and Ganga's profound thought. No other business discussion has ever inspired me like this.

**S:** You know, earlier I used to feel embarrassed when someone addressed me as uncle, but now I have gotten used to it.

**A:** How did that happen?

**S:** The turning point occurred a few years ago, when a cab driver addressed me as uncle. *Saab* was replaced by uncle, and it quite pleased me. He might have called me that because of my grey hair! To me, it meant that age is still respected in the true Indian tradition.

**A:** I am reminded of the song in 'The Fiddler on the Roof' — Tradition, Tradition, Tradition. It is like my granny's house. I go there to renew values and clean up my soul. My grandma has maintained her poise following traditions for eating, dressing, sleeping, and saying her prayers regularly.

**S:** I feel as if you are describing my grandmother. Could you show me the summary of your punch lines?

**A:** Sure.

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<b>Stimulating thoughts of <i>dabawalas</i></b>
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- Food prepared with affection at home provides divine contentment
- If you change just enough you achieve embrative happiness
- When you move beyond the fear of new entrants and competition you feel free with belief in God that he will provide new customers
- Search what is durable in times of major change;
- It provides the wildest of business opportunities
- Decentralise to empower and deliver with excellence
- So as to ensure that the cost of change is least to the customer
- Savour the old but enjoy the changing
- [sprinters@bottomofpyramid.com](mailto:sprinters@bottomofpyramid.com)
- The harder you hold on loyally to the old customers with dependable delivery service, it provides lasting business.
- Lifelong devotional commitment to timely deliverables brings royal recognition and increase in business

- At the prince's wedding, affection mysteriously leads to bonding and contentment; its ethos is local but broad banding is global
  - The success secret of any business is to make its service segment humane
- 

**S:** In each of these themes, there is a coherent philosophy, an architecture of values that sustains a durable business at the low end of the technological structure.

**A:** And it's really simple!

**S:** Simple because it is innovative. Innovation at the highest level is converting values into knowledge and sellable products. It is the inclusive thinking of *dabawalas* that connects with people's desires at the existential level.

**A:** I understand. The *dabawalas* have matched the complexity of modern transport systems by providing customers with effective service. They sought simplicity over sophistication, echoing Gandhi's philosophy.

**A:** A *dabawala's* white pyjama, shirt and Gandhi cap arouse feelings of sympathy for the struggle for existence in a megalopolis like Mumbai.

**S:** The elements of design in the organization are values and awareness of one's strengths and limitations. The central value is "teamwork = network = cooperation". Skill enhancement is achieved by

improving individual speed. That's innovation infused with genuine concern for customers.

**A:** They have a definable identity and an ancient set of values within their organization. They have internalised the value statements. Their behaviour embodies it, and conveys the values to the world.

**S:** The interesting point to note is that all this is done without a designated CEO. Many of our seers made innovations in interpreting the meaning, message, methods and techniques of internalising the spirit of the *Vedas* in service of humanity.

**A:** I know what you are driving at. Humanity has a good record of innovations in science and technology but not in service. The cry is for effective and authentic service at affordable cost in all facets of life. This is more our need than the West's, because we have so many people in the poor and lower middle class. The *dabawalas* have been innovative in sustaining an age-old business. They retained their values but embraced the change wisely. Their value creation dynamics improved their efficiency when they started sprinting.

**S:** Vision is the art of seeing the possible. There is a cultural substratum firmly rooted in the teaching of Marathi saints, like Dnyaneshwar, Tukaram, and others. The scriptures say: *Charaiveti, Charaiveti* (move on, move on). The lesser the contact with earth, the greater is the contact with heaven. When *dabawalas* are on their daily seven hour walks, their contact

totally immerses them in the 'work is worship' matrix; this embodies perfect time management

**A:** It is also drawn from the traditional epics like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and local folklore. Their teachings form their operating manual. They devoutly carry the *palkhi* (palanquin) of traditional wisdom. They have therefore been able to maintain a high level of satisfaction and morale.

**S:** They walk the talk without a shred of doubt about anything. That's their strength. Didn't someone say, "Strong values of hard work, spiritual faith, and service will take you a long way?"

**A:** Yes, Zig Ziglar in *See You at the Top* said:

*You can have everything in life if you will just help others to get what they want*

Jim Collins said in *Built to Last*—

*Values matter, they build organizations that last*

**S:** Which organizations in India does this apply to, Anita?

**A:** The house of Tata. Recently, Narayana Murthy said, "Technology is about reducing cost, improving productivity, and bringing comfort to the people". Who needs that more than the poor?

**S:** The world management guru late Peter Drucker once propounded the central concept of his management philosophy: People were an organization's most

valuable asset. Management deals with their values, their growth and development, social structure, the community, and even with their spiritual values. What Raghu and Ganga are saying and doing is exactly what the experts and icons have stated quite unequivocally. Values are the pillars of socially conscious sound business houses. The businessmen who build such organizations of excellence remain faithful to their values in action.

**A:** The difference between ordinary and socially conscious businessmen is the attitude they show about passing on the cost to the customer. In effect, the *dabawalas* fulfil a societal need by using high technology to increase their productivity and provide customer satisfaction with minimal cost escalation. This is a unique service to all the classes alike.

**S:** No discrimination; economic, social, cast, religion, or gender!

**A:** They have only four ladies in 5000?

**S:** They have no objection to having more, but the ladies don't come because of the heavy work load and hardship involved. The four who have joined are doing work that they can manage.

**A:** Charles Handy recently said —

*Success means being totally at ease with your self. The happiest people in the world are those who are most content with themselves*



**S:** The whole philosophy of *dabawalas* about work and life is based on contentment. Look at the words—manage-men-t and content-men-t. Consider the ‘t’ to stand for technology and time, what remains is men managing contents.

**A:** If actions are synergistic with thoughts, the work flow is managed smoothly. If we manage ourselves well enough with the holistic flow, we are contented.

**S:** That is what Raghu and Ganga were saying in Marathi, *samadhan* means contentment. My father used to recite this *sloka* from the *Gita*—

*Sukh dukhhe samea krutva  
Labha labho jaya jayo ||*

**S:** It means, gain or loss, victory or defeat, whatever; take a balanced view, maintain equipoise.

**A:** *Samavrutricha swikar kar*. Is this correct in Marathi, Uncle?

**S:** Yes. The *dabawalas* are from an agricultural background. We say we have had five revolutions, agricultural, industrial, technological, information, and knowledge. The sixth is not revolution; it is revelation, ‘wisdom’.

**A:** And we are learning it from semi-literate people with an agrarian background. The wheel of knowledge is coming full circle!

**S:** At the same time let us not belittle our knowledge base. We are able to understand the patterns in their

thought processes, design alternatives, and learn quickly the essentials that we can replicate. Do you think you got the business model you were looking for?

**A:** Yes, and much more.

**S:** The philosophy is promisingly secular, productivity oriented, and humane. Its USP, which I like, is cost consciousness for customers, and moderation in behaviour. They have lived in harmony in the cosmopolitan ambience of Mumbai while retaining their own cultural ethos. Their choices are elegant and healing, because they have not violently disturbed the ecology of self, family, and community.

*Dabawalas* have also fulfilled their social responsibilities by building four *Dharmashalas* in Maharashtra, in Bhimashankar in 1930, Aalandi in 1950, Jejuri in 1984, and Pandharpur in 2000. The facilities are given on nominal charges to public for social and religious functions. They continue to raise funds for such charity work and manage their activities with responsible commitment.

**A:** The business model is replicable, given the basics. One would need these basics if one wanted to replicate the model. The values however are imitable in quite a few service set-ups within organizations if the decision makers look “out of window”.

**S:** What I admire in you Anita, you did not overanalyse things and complicate matters. You have an open mind.

**A:** Yes. Overanalyses lead to verbosity and overstatements. That does not help to establish understanding.

**S:** What does?

**A:** Understatement. My father used to say, “If you *understate* a case you have better chances of establishing *understanding*”.

**S:** That is correct. Tactically underplaying your point of view conveys humility instead of aggression. In eastern cultures it has better chances for striking a deal.

**A:** I learnt that the biggest inhibitor to change lies within me. Thank you for the time that you have given me, I shall cherish them.

**S:** I will too; let’s celebrate.

We celebrate with food and reliving the witty rejoinders from Raghu and Ganga in our conversations. As we part, we happen to whisper together.

*“I am eager to share the story with all”*



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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

All service organizations are founded on mercenary values, where customer care is the last priority.

*Current Opportunities*

The service business can be reoriented on an architecture of values that nurtures the genuine service mentality. It provides durable growth. It is neither mercenary nor free. It provides decent self-employment based on individual drive and collective team spirit.

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## Appendix

**S**ant Dnyaneshwar (1275–1296), also known as Dnyanadeva or Dnyaneshvar was a 13th century rebel saint-poet born in Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra in India. He was a *yogi* born in a socially marginalized high caste family. He was the first noteworthy proponent of *Bhagawat dharma*, a sect of the *bhakti* (devotional worship) tradition in Hinduism. Dnyaneshwar composed the *Bhavarthadeepika* or *Dnyaneshwari* to explain the holy book *Bhagavad Gita* to the masses. Sant Dnyaneshwar wrote *Dnyaneshwari* in Newasa town of Ahmednagar district. He took *sanjeevan samadhi*, a yogic path to salvation by giving up worldly life at the age of 21. His teachings have had a lasting effect in moulding the Marathi mindset of all castes and communities.

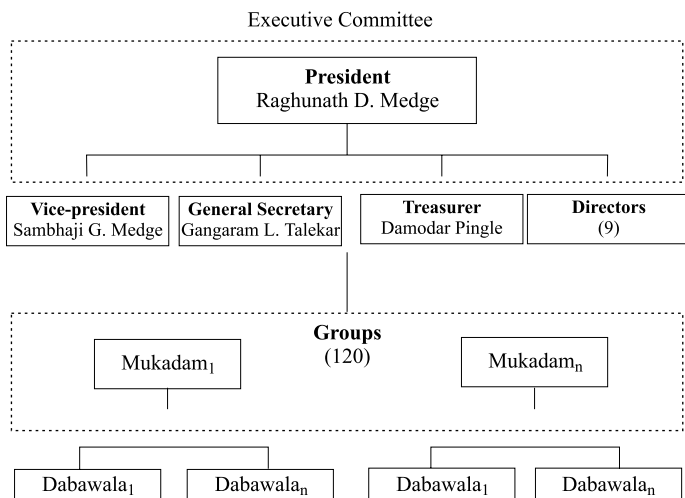
Sant Tukaram (1598–1649) was born in Dehu, a village 18 miles from Pune in Maharashtra. Tukaram is the most popular saint of Maharashtra. He spent much of his spare time in contemplation and studying the works of Jnaneswar, Namdev and Eknath, other saints of his native land.

His *abhangs* (devotional couplets) reveal the great inner struggle he underwent. They also provide insight into the stages of realization of God through *bhakti* or devotion. The separation of the soul from God gives

intense pain to the devotee. This is known as *viraha* to Hindu mystics and the “Dark night of the soul” to Christian mystics. Tukaram expresses this condition in his *abhangs*.

According to Tukaram, *sadhaka* (a mendicant who has subdued his passions) had to remain impervious to worldly happenings and concentrate on God. Singing and chanting of God’s glory was the surest path of realization of God.





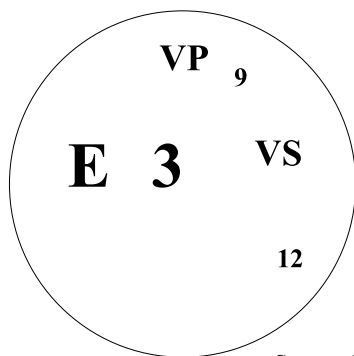
—Source: R. Medge

Key:

m: number of *Mukadams* in a group

n: number of *dabawalas* in a team

**Figure A.1** Organizational structure of Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Charity Trust



Source: R. Medge

**Figure A.2** Delivery Code followed by *dabawalas*

Coding Key:

VP Code for the residential location

9 VS 12 Code for *dabawalas* to use at the destination location where:

9 is the code for *dabawalas* at the destination station

VS is the code for the building name

12 is the code for the floor number

E Code for *dabawalas* at the residential railway station

3 Code for destination railway station

Codes are painted at the top of each *daba* in distinct colours of the respective groups.

8:25 a.m.: The *daba* is filled with lunch at the client's kitchen and kept outside the door of the residence.

8:30 a.m.: The *dabawala* arrives, picks up the *daba* and moves on, knocking at the door only if the *daba* is not seen. Under normal circumstances, there is no interaction with any member of the client's household.

8:38 a.m.: The *daba* is placed on the bicycle or pushcart together with *dabas* collected from other customers.

9:20 a.m.: Bicycles and pushcarts drawn by individual *dabawalas* arrive from various collection centres to the suburban railway station.

9:30 a.m.: The sorting operation begins with *dabas* sorted according to destinations and placed in cartages that are specific to each destination. The cartages come in two standard sizes, accommodating 24 and 48 *dabas* each.

9:41 a.m.: The suburban train arrives. The cartages, normally numbering 5–6, are loaded into the special compartment located next to the driver's cabin.

10:21 a.m.: The train arrives at one of the major hubs. The cartages are unloaded and bundled with those arriving from other collection centres. They are re-sorted according to destinations.

11:05 a.m.: Cartages are loaded into the suburban train for onward journey to the final destination terminals.

11:45 a.m.: The suburban train reaches the terminal station. Cartages are unloaded and *dabas* are re-sorted, now according to specific delivery routes.

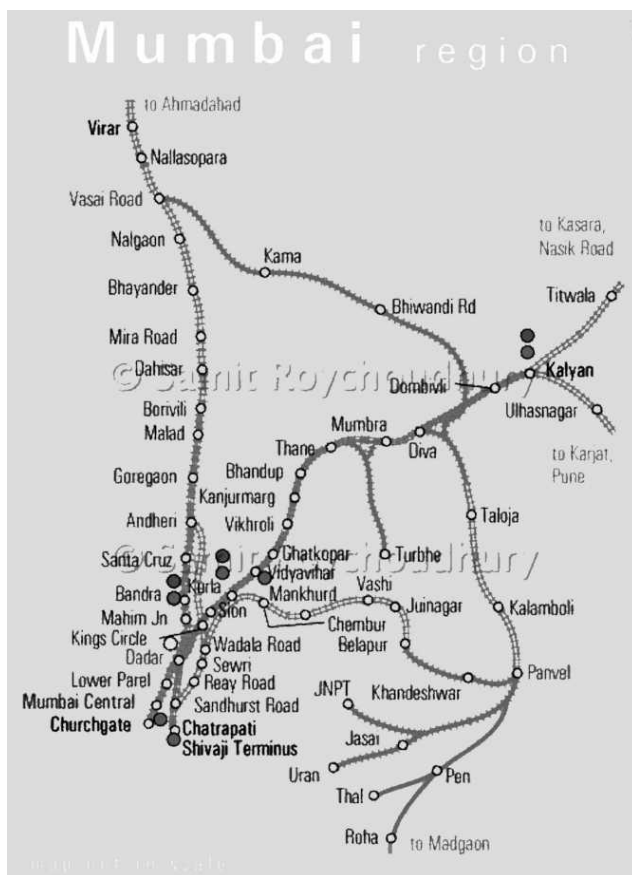
12:10 p.m.: *Dabas* are placed in destination-specific cartages and hitched, typically on to bicycles or pushcarts for delivery to individual clients.

12:30 p.m.: The *daba* is delivered at the doorstep of the client's workplace.

The delivery process is reversed in the afternoon. The empty *daba* is picked up between 1:15 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. for its return to the client's home early that evening (e.g. by 5:30 p.m.).

— Source: R. Megde

**Figure A.3** Sample of typical daily journey of a *dabawala*



**Figure A.4** Railway Map of Mumbai



BIRKHALL

8<sup>th</sup> August, 2005

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Dear Mr. Hedge".

My wife and I were deeply concerned to learn of the appalling floods in Mumbai as a result of the catastrophic Monsoon weather. We are particularly distressed by the suffering being endured by so many people in and around Mumbai and wanted the Dabbawallahs to know how much we feel for you all and that our hearts go out to all those whose lives and property have been so cruelly affected by this continuing tragedy.

We send you all our fondest thoughts and heartfelt wishes.

A large, handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Yours most sincerely".  
A second handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "and sympathetically".

**Figure A.5** Letter from Prince Charles to Mr. Raghunath Medge, President, Nutan Mumbai Tiffin Box Suppliers Association

DABAWALAS



## Epilogue

Wherever and whenever I have told this story, it has aroused tremendous interest. The general pattern of the listener was to see the applicability of this model to individual and company situations. One common feedback overwhelmed me, which I quote:

*The take home packet is bountiful and reassuring*

I trust you will also find it likewise. Kindly send me your feedback. It is valuable for me and I look forward to receiving it at *shrinpandit@hotmail.com*





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<b>Take-aways</b>
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*Current Practice*

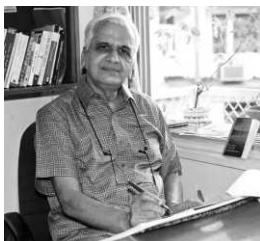
The struggle for finding solutions continues within the existing frames of reference (in-box thinking). These are becoming less and less relevant. They produce piecemeal solutions because the approach is fragmentary, whereas all segments of a business have become interdependent.

*Current Opportunities*

All opportunity indicators in this book underline the principle: *The whole is greater than the parts*. Thinking out of the box will aid you in seeing beyond business to values and belief systems that have the potential to shape innovative business models.

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## Author's Profile

Shrinivas Pandit is a veteran HR professional and a leadership counsellor. His clients include Dian Graha Elektrika, Indonesia, Biocon Group, Bangalore, NABARD, and Pitambari, Mumbai.

Previously, Mr. Pandit was Executive Vice-President (Personnel) Siemens Ltd. Prior to that he headed the human resource divisions of Blue Star, Herdillia Chemicals and Johnson & Johnson.

Mr. Pandit is a graduate in economics and law; and obtained a postgraduate diploma in personnel management and industrial relations from the London School of Economics. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development, UK.

He has previously authored three widely acclaimed books—*Thought Leaders*, *Design Your Career* and *Exemplary CEOs*. He has also written numerous articles on career guidance, organization cultures interpersonal relationship, leadership, conflict resolution, mindset change, etc. He has conducted many in-company workshops, seminars and addressed public conferences.

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