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Women Behind the Wheel: The Story of Satvashila Potekar

Background

Satvashila Potekar is 40 years old. Her mother is a waste picker; her two sons live at a boarding school for poor children; her husband, an alcoholic construction worker, had abandoned his family many years ago. She lives in Khedegaon, a neighbourhood in the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC).

“I always carry a photograph of my sons with me,” she said as she reached into a plastic bag and fished out a brown envelope with an 8x10 print. Also in the bag was a newspaper clipping about her – a woman truck-driver working in SWaCH PCMC.

“When Sangeeta John, the local SWaCH coordinator, asked me if I wanted to learn driving I told her that I didn’t know how to open the door of a truck. She expected me to learn how to drive the thing! But she insisted that I take the course and I did. We went to the Regional Transport Office twice to take the driver’s test. I passed on my third attempt. This was in August last year.”

Challenges

In the SWaCH PCMC model, waste-collection is done by independent teams consisting of two waste pickers and a driver. Each team collects waste on an assigned route from approximately 2000 houses every day. The waste pickers sort recyclable waste and transfer the rest at designated “feeder points” to PCMC-run compactors for transport to the Moshi landfill.

SWaCH conducted surveys and time-studies prior to launching the project. The results were used to design routes and schedules for the teams. Within a week, SWaCH found that ground realities raised questions that the initial projections did not always answer. For example, eight-thirty in the morning at “Apartment Block A” was “on-time” according to the initial route-plan. But was it the “right time?” Did the residents prefer an earlier time? Did they discard more recyclable waste (which would need more time to sort)? Would the monsoons (and wet roads) interfere with collection times at the feeder point?

Optimization of the route and timings is a dynamic equation that involves feedback from consumers and the local SWaCH supervisors. The waste picker teams on each route adapted their timings and routes, intuitively balancing the equation as they went about their work: when residents complained (feedback!) about collection



photo: A. Thavaraj

timings, they adapted; when the feeder point times were shifted back, they re-organized their sorting schedules; some teams made two trips on the entire route every day; others made four short trips covering a part of their route each time. SWaCH found that teams with drivers who understood the waste picking business adapted very well to the demands of a mechanized collection model. These teams received a lot of positive feedback from residents and PCMC supervisors. The ideal “dream team” would be run by three women – all waste pickers from the same neighbourhood and one with a truck-driver’s licence.

However, most waste pickers do not have the minimum educational qualifications required to apply for a truck driver’s licence. As a result, most drivers on the SWaCH teams are men with no links to the waste picking profession. They do not identify with a team of “women waste pickers,” and, consequently, the waste pickers see no incentive in sharing their profits (from the sale of scrap) with the drivers, which leads to bitterness. It is a vicious cycle.

The driver’s seat in Satvashila’s truck is adjusted as far forward as it can go, and she has customized its height with the help of two cushions. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly as she stalled the truck. She eased the truck out on her next attempt.

“My mother could have worked with me. She still collects waste, sorts it and sells it. But she is too old for this work. I don’t think she can climb on to the back of the truck at all. If she could, we could have been a team! If family members, or relatives or neighbours create teams then profit-sharing is not a problem.”

Forcing a profit-sharing arrangement on the team is an option that SWaCH does not want to pursue since it is likely to worsen the relationships between team members. The organization reasons that waste pickers must reach their own conclusions about the composition of their team and balance the prospects of higher profits versus the potential



photo: A. Thavaraj

termination of their services— each team’s performance is evaluated every month and residents’ feedback is an important criterion. In other words, waste pickers must learn to realign, restructure or even rebuild their business model based on feedback.

Though Satvashila was a member of the KKPKP union, she too was not immediately welcomed into a team. She had to win the confidence of her colleagues. “When I got my licence no one wanted me on their team because they were afraid that my driving skills were not good enough. They were scared that I might crash the truck and they would lose their route. I did not lose hope,” said Satvashila. A year passed. She worked as a waste picker and maintained her driving skills by parking trucks and filling in for regular drivers who had called in sick. In July 2011, Satvashila was finally accepted by the team that worked on Route No. 16.

“I show people this card with the phone numbers of the SWaCH supervisors and the helpline and tell them to ring these numbers if they had any complaints,” she said. Then she smiled and nodded vigorously, answering the next question before it was asked.

One month on the job. Zero complaints from residents. SWaCH hopes that Satvashila and her team will act as role models for their colleagues.

At present, of the 119 drivers on SWaCH’s rolls, 20 are waste pickers. Six of these are women. SWaCH hopes that waste pickers will encourage other members from their community to learn driving and join their team. Many waste pickers on the SWaCH PCMC routes have been inspired by Satvashila’s achievements. And a few take informal driving lessons too. They practise driving on the service roads near the collection grounds. Again, only a few can try their hand at driving because only a few drivers—those who were waste pickers, or have relatives who are—allow them to sit behind the wheel.

The regular workforce of waste pickers can take leave if they hire someone to take their place on the team, which is usually not a problem. However, there aren’t enough back-up drivers in SWaCH.

Satvashila misses her children. “I want to spend time with them, not visit them for an hour...”

Looking forward

After analyzing six months of consumer feedback and profits on all its routes, SWaCH is convinced that over the next two years all teams will groom and then hire a woman waste picker as their driver. External funding will be used to buy a tipper-truck and hire a driving instructor. Apart from driving practice, drivers will also learn basic repair skills. Older waste pickers like Satvashila’s mother could use this truck for less strenuous work like newspaper collection or as a short-distance (sorting shed to scrap shop) transport. Further, these relatively easier assignments would help inexperienced drivers hone their road-skills before moving on to the more demanding door-to-door work.

“My mother is a roving waste picker,” said Satvashila. “Strangely, though I work in the same business in the same neighbourhoods, my life is completely different! A girl from Khedegaon driving a truck! I’m not complaining, though. I love driving. Sometimes, I forget to eat because I am driving. I could drive all day...”

In the future, the team-building process might be reversed to create cohesive teams from the onset – a member from the waste picker community will be assisted in obtaining a driver’s licence; she will build a team, which will work out a schedule and profit-sharing strategy that best suits them; the team will then apply to SWaCH for a route.

The waste picker-driver will be a founding partner of the team and equally invested in its success. Satvashila, too, is optimistic about the change: “When I’m driving my truck, I have seen women—middle-class women— calling out to their daughters to come out and see me: a woman driving a tipper truck. I find it inspiring that someone far wealthier than I could, in turn, be inspired by what I do...”

“Three women and a tipper truck” might become the logo for SWaCH PCMC services.

Key Concepts

- Teams work best when each member has a stake in the profits as well as the losses.
- Teams should be encouraged to manage their own HR, cash flow and risks and apply these concepts to their business model.
- Adaptability often gets work done in numerous unpredictable ways. Instead of analysing the solutions, focus on creating adaptable teams and let them solve their problems.
- Long term planning for all MBOs should promote basic education for all its members regardless of the field that they work in.

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