

Pratibha Kale: Shipping Challenge

Part One - Read to the bottom of this page then stop.

Pratibha Kale had just been asked to solve a problem. It was not the first time she had jumped in to solve a challenge, but this one would be difficult.

Pratibha Kale was a Customer Service Manager for shipping company APL Limited. She supervised eight Customer Service Representatives at APL's Western District Office in Mumbai, India. Pratibha and her staff worked with APL's customers to help them calculate how much it would cost and how long it would take to ship cargo to other places. They also worked with people and businesses in Mumbai who had received shipments from other countries: Pratibha and her staff made sure those customers came in to claim their cargo and fill out the paperwork that was required. And she and her staff helped customers who wanted to track down cargo that might currently be almost anywhere in the world.

Pratibha had worked in the shipping business in India for 20 years. During that time, she had seen dramatic changes. When she began working in 1980, for instance, computers were not yet used in her office. Pratibha would use "carbon paper" and a typewriter to make eight to ten copies of the financial and customs documents each shipment of cargo needed. Then, because she had neither e-mail nor a fax machine, she would have to send that paperwork with a messenger to the place the shipment was going. Keeping track of paperwork and getting it where it needed to be was a real hassle!

As she used all this paperwork to make payments to the customs house brokers who arranged to ship cargo with APL, Pratibha became eager for tools that would help her work more efficiently. So, it was not surprising that in 1984, she volunteered to computerize the brokerage payment process – even though she knew almost nothing about computers! She had to learn quickly. she and her team studied each step in the process to figure out what the computer program would need to do, and the system they created was a success.

Today, Pratibha had been given another challenge. And once again, she realized she had a lot to learn.

STOP

Part Two - *Read to the bottom of this page then stop.*

Pratibha’s problem had to do with “dangerous and hazardous” cargo (often called DNH cargo). Her office had been receiving complaints from APL offices in the United States that they were not receiving enough information about DNH shipments. Without good information, the cargo could be delayed and APL could even face penalties.

From her work with customers, Pratibha already knew quite a bit about DNH cargo. She knew that the term “DNH” referred very specifically to substances that could be dangerous when they were shipped: chemicals, liquids or solids that could easily catch fire, or substances that would react badly with water. Because of a concern for safety – both the safety of the captain and crew carrying the DNH cargo and also the safety of the overall ocean environment – there were very strict rules for shippers who carried DNH cargo from place to place.

Rules about DNH cargo had been created by an organization called the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The IMO helped make sure shippers around the world all followed the same safety rules both at sea and when they were in port. In addition, each country had established its own rules about shipping and DNH cargo. In the United States, for instance, the U.S. Department of Transportation set the rules about dangerous cargo.

Pratibha knew that there were many different kinds or “classes” of DNH cargo. There were different rules for each class of cargo. The rules were based on how dangerous the cargo was, whether it was a liquid, a solid, or a gas, and what harm the cargo could cause. For instance, shippers were required to carry cargo containers of some highly flammable liquids above the deck of the ship; that way, if there was a fire aboard ship, the flammable cargo could be pushed overboard before it exploded. Pratibha knew that everyone wanted to treat DNH cargo safely and avoid accidents. Her job was to help by making sure all the paperwork which described this cargo arrived on time to the people who needed to see it to know how to deal with the cargo.

STOP

Part Three - Read to the bottom of this page.

Pratibha knew she couldn't solve the problem alone. So she and her co-workers created a team to work together. They called themselves the "Firebugs," because they were "fired" with determination to make things right the first time and "bugged" by the complaints about late paperwork.

Pratibha had learned a lot from her experiences at APL. She knew that to fix a problem she had to understand step-by-step what was supposed to happen. Then, she could identify where the problems were occurring and fix them.

To start their work, Pratibha and her team became experts on dangerous and hazardous cargo. What did different people – from a ship's captain to a truck driver to a United States customs official – need to know about DNH cargo to make sure they'd treat the cargo safely? What were all the different rules about different kinds of dangerous cargo? And when did all of these people need to know that information?

For instance, Pratibha learned that a ship's captain couldn't just get a letter after he sailed telling him he was carrying three containers full of hazardous chemicals on his ship. He had to know well before he sailed and even before the ship was loaded, since the containers with dangerous chemicals would probably need to be loaded in very specific places so they wouldn't cause problems on board the ship.

Now that she had a good understanding of why the paperwork about DNH cargo was so important, who needed it, and when they needed it, Pratibha turned her attention to the people who created all the paperwork. Who was involved – in the offices of APL customers and at APL offices – in identifying dangerous cargo and calling attention to it through special paperwork?

As Pratibha and her team studied the problem, they learned that people in the Logistics Department who worked at the port were receiving 25% of their DNH paperwork late. The paperwork was late because of problems Pratibha and her staff were having with the paperwork at Customer Service. What could her team do about the problem?

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Part Four - *Read to the bottom of this page.*

Pratibha quickly realized that no one on the staff meant to cause problems. But they had so much complex information to collect and track that they sometimes didn't get that information to all the other people who needed it.

Pratibha knew she and her Firebugs team could help the Customer Service staff develop better methods to create the paperwork and get it to all the people who needed it. But first she had to find a nice way to make sure they understood there was a problem and then offer to help.

Pratibha decided to write a memo to the Customer Service staff. In her memo, she would:

1. Describe the problem APL's Mumbai office was facing with DNH cargo.
2. Explain why the paperwork was so important and why it needed to be on time.
3. Offer her team's help in solving the problem.