

ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR UTILIZATION OF PUBLIC RELATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION

In a buttress of Lawenda's thesis that the advertising industry has to be willing to look at new opportunities, Okoro (1998) noted that the 21st century is bound to witness a plethora of innovations and developments in virtually every sphere of human endeavour, especially as it relates to the way things are done. One major sphere in the century which calls for a lot of innovations is the phenomenal and dynamic field of public administration - a people oriented field with ever-increasing human complexities. This paper is premised on the thesis that effective performance in the field of public administration requires the innovative application of the concepts, principles and strategies of another equally phenomenal, ever-dynamic and people oriented field, with ever-increasing human complexities, known as public relations. To have proper perspectives on subject matter, it is crucial that we examine the key concepts involved; namely public relations and public administration, as well as the theoretical basis for public relations in public administration.

Public Relations and Public Administration

Public relations has a commonality of interest with public administration, that is, to get things done the right way. Both fields also have a determinative word in common, i.e. public. While public relations has the word "relations" as its object, public administration has the word "administration" as its focus. The word "relations" (usually used in a singular sense) connotes interaction and togetherness while the word "administration" also connotes the same. Since administration is a "co-operative human action" (Nwosu, 1980), public relations is at the heart of public administration. By implication, therefore, the interest of public administration is essentially, the interest of public relations namely to move humanity forward. For this reason, the application of public relations principles, strategies and philosophy is crucial to the success of public administration in modern society. In this sense, it has become imperative to integrate these principles, strategies and philosophy in the administration of public organizations in order to achieve organizational

objectives in record time and win public confidence, goodwill, acceptance and approval.

The need for the integration of public relations principles, strategies and philosophy in the administration of public organizations is very urgent in Nigeria where public administration, as viewed at the moment, is tied to the pre-judicial dimension of bureaucracy which associates government business with red-tapism, nepotism, bribery and corruption, and slipshod attitude to job performance. Going by this view, the bureaucrat is that public official who causes delays and creates bottleneck in the administrative process. He is neck deep in the book of rules and pushes the human aspect of organizational management to the back-burner in the scheme of things. He rarely smiles and stresses always the line between the superordinate and subordinate positions. He is slow to decision-making and slow to action. He is the bugbear of the worker who believes that the fear of bureaucracy is the beginning of wisdom.

In such an inclement administrative environment, the bureaucrat has become the proverbial tortoise who is regarded as the cause of every havoc in the animal kingdom. Therefore, when a file is delayed or gets lost in transit, it is the bureaucrat. If a benefit is delayed or denied, it is the bureaucrat, and so on. This general feeling about bureaucracy has engendered low morale among the workforce in Nigeria public organizations, giving rise to the work attitude which regards government business as nobody's business. To extricate Nigerian public organizations from this administrative nooze, it is important that the principles, strategies and philosophy of public relations are incorporated in the administrative process. For a highlight of the perspective we are espousing in our thesis, it is pertinent to take a close look at the definitional foci of the terms: "public relations" and "public administration", commencing with the term "public".

Public

In public relations parlance, the term "public" refers to a group of people with common interests, needs and desires. Every organization, even down to the family, has various publics which it must cater for in order to remain alive and relevant in society. The number and size of an organization's public depends on the size and nature of the organization. For instance, the university has the following publics: students, lecturers, non-academic staff, parents and guardians, alumni, the university community, the university community neighbours, governments,

contractors/suppliers, special visitors, etc. Even within a public category, we can still effect a division, for example, senior staff and junior staff. To relate effectively and friendly with each public, it is vital to effect a comprehensive public profile.

Public Relations

Public relations is a "deliberate planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (see Coulson Thomas, 1979). It is "a professional art and science in communication which creates a conduit for continuous interaction between an organization and its publics" (Okoro: 1988). Taking cognisance of the expanding role of public relations in modern society, the Mexican statement, cited in Nwosu (1996) defines public relations as "the art and science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organization leaders, and implementing planned programme of action which will serve the organization and the public interest".

As a management function, public relations evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance (see Nwosu, *supra*).

More than ever before, public relations is going to be needed in today's business and economic situation (Bahl, 1994). There is no gainsaying the fact that no organization, whether profit or non-profit making, can survive in today's world in the absence of public support or at least public tolerance.

Public Administration

Way back in 1969, Corson and Harris defined public administration as "...decision-making, planning the work to be done, formulating objectives and goals... establishing controls and other functions performed by government executives and supervisors, "emphasizing that it is the action part of government, the means by which the purpose and goals of government are realised". This definition neatly encapsulates the current thoughts on public administration as a field of "cooperative human action" Echoing this view, John A. Vieg, cited in Akpan (1982), notes *inter alia*:

at its fullest range... (public administration) embraces every area and activity governed by public policy. It may even be taken to include the formal processes and operations through which the legislative exercises its power, for there is much adroit management in the conduct of legislative business. In a literal sense, public

administration also includes functions of the courts in the administration of justice and the work of military agencies as well as those of a civilian character. By established usage, however, public administration has come to signify the organization, personnel, practices and procedures essential to effective performance of the civilian functions entrusted to the executive branch of government.

Going by the foregoing, therefore, it is easy to comprehend public administration as the management of public organizations, and since this process involves the management of human and material resources, one is not left in doubt as to the relevance of public relations in the administrative continuum.

Any process or activity that involves "cooperative human action" calls for the application of public relations techniques and strategies if set objectives and goals are to be realised in the spirit of understanding. It is this understanding that promotes goodwill and acceptance. Since public administration is targeted at catering for the interest of the public in view of the public nature of its goals, the gains of public relations must be harnessed to serve the public interest on a sustainable basis. For this reason, it is crucial to adopt the public relations approach to problem-solving in the process of solving public administration problems. This need becomes more evident in public programme management.

Most of the time, the business of public administration is handled in a standoffish manner, buttressing the view that government business is nobody's business. The public relations perspective views government business as somebody's business which must be handled with a deep sense of responsibility. After all, "the government in fact is nothing but an image, seen through the activities of its servants or agents" (Akpan, 1982). The business of public relations in public administration is to give a human face to the administrative side of government business.

Theoretical Anchor

The human relations aspect of public administration is, no doubt, the most problematic. For instance, an organization with a workforce of between 300 to 500 people, working together to attain set goals, usually manifest their individuality in the process of "working together". The administrative challenge in this instance is to get such 300 or 500 individuals to bring out their best in the service of the organization. This, certainly, is not an easy task. Classical organizational theorists like Taylor, Fayol and Unwick thought it was as easy as getting a machine to do the

work. These classical theorists "...drew too much on mechanical analogies, and undervalued the extent to which human systems differ from mechanical systems" (Spann, 1962). In the process of administrative engineering, the scientific management school and the human relations approach remained, for a long time, the dominant perspectives in organizational management.

Along the line, however, the imperfections of the "dominant perspectives" started manifesting themselves. These imperfections can be itemized thus:

- "the activities and capabilities of human systems and their relations to the environment are known in ways relevant to their performances;
- the men inside them bring to them, or develop inside them, conflicting attitudes and aims;
- activities at one point are not simply automatic responses to those at another but involve choices often based on uncertain or misperceived information on attitudes and aims that conflict (Spann, supra).

According to Spann, while the scientific management school inclined towards creating formal structures and procedures, and then fitting workers into them, the human relations approach stressed "the social relationships of work and the psychological problems of workers".

In view of their "extremist" orientation - one towards the machine man, and the other towards the psychologisation of organizational problems, modern organizational theorists tend to discount the philosophies and principles of the classical theorists. However, despite the shortcomings of the classical theorists, they are not just "full of sound and fury signifying nothing". The emphasis on structure, procedures and inter-relationships among the workforce has been found to be in line with modern organizational theories.

Taking cognisance of the structural, procedural and relational dimensions of organizational management, we deem it appropriate to anchor our thesis, as here professed, on the Communication Imperative Theory. This theory is based on the need to endow public administration with a human face. It is rooted in the research carried out by the Harvard Business School under the leadership of Elton Mayo. One of the vital findings of this research is that showing your fellow human being that he counts in the scheme of things produces immense rub-off on worker

output, giving rise to increased productivity.

Modern public administration lays deep emphasis on the establishment of effective communication structures. In turn, effective communication structures are germane to the enhancement of the smooth operation of organizations. To encourage greater output per worker, the work force must be won over by integrating them in the organizational communication mainstream. When it becomes essentially a downward, "us-and-them" affair, misunderstanding, misconception, misperception and misinterpretation are bound to set in. The communication imperative theory espouses the shedding of the bossy, impersonal, cold and police nature of public administration which has led to the development of a non-committal attitude within the public workforce. The idea of effective public administration through public relations is based on the need to re-engineer the commitment of the public workforce to government business. This idea forms the bedrock of the Communication Imperative Theory.

The Mandate of Public Relations in Public Administration

Public relations has the mandate to explain the policies and actions of public organizations to the relevant publics so as to win public support, understanding and acceptance. "By making people less strange to one another, one could overcome prejudice and suspicion and encourage in its place, a mutual understanding among people" (Crossroads: 1996). The role of public relations in public administration is to create and sustain a condition for co-operative human action in every administrative plank. The process of public administration itself is indeed the process of public relations, for at every point of human interaction, the possibility for understanding and goodwill or misunderstanding and ill will exists. For this reason, care must be taken to tailor communication towards the achievement of positive outcomes.

Essentially, public relations should be used to effect the following in the administrative process:

- provide advice on organizational policies and actions;
- analyse trends and impacts of organizational policies;
- predict consequences of organizational policies, behaviours and attitudes of publics;
- adjust those behaviours, policies and actions of organizations to align with public interest;
- establish and sustain a two-way communication between an organization and its publics;

- promote mutual understanding by anticipating and preventing conflicts and misperceptions;
- research on public attitudes, expectations and behaviours within and outside the organizations;
- project corporate identity;
- adopt a planned and sustained programme of action; and
- promote support for profit and non-profit oriented activities (Igben, 1997).

Public Relations and Government Business: The Nigerian Experience

The prime function of government is to administer the affairs of the State. It is this perspective that made Harold Laski to define government as the institution which runs the affairs of a State; "a State being a society integrated by possessing a coercive authority legally supreme over any individual or group which is part of the society" (Laski: 1935). Without effective administration, a government cannot justify its reasons for existence.

Ukwu (1984) notes that "the central business of government which derives its power from the people or its legitimacy from its commitment to their interests, is to deliver an acceptable and improved quality of life for the society". The mandate of public relations in government business is to win public approval of government actions and mobilize public support in the process of public administration.

In modern society, government business is growing more and more complicated. Public policy "is becoming increasingly complex, and with it the art and science of creating supportive constituencies which is what Public Relations is all about" (Babangida: 1992).

Stressing the importance of public relations in the business of government; Nnaemeka said *inter-alia*:

The sacred duty which government in a democracy owe to the governed, is to provide information on all that they do for and on behalf of the people and make themselves, their policies and programmes clearly understood at all time by those on whose behalf they act, in order to win the understanding and willing support of the populace. This should not only be recognised as an imperative of public office holding but should be demonstrated in the organization and style of operation of government (Nnaemeka, 1989:10).

Indeed, it is the recognition of the crucial role of public relations in the administration of public organizations that made the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to set up a Communication Gap Committee in May 1997 to study organizational communications problems in the Federal civil service and make recommendations to:

- improve communication and relationship within the federal civil service itself and the state civil services and parastatals;
- improve the public image of the civil service;
- improve relationship between the press and the civil services; and
- protect civil servants from wanton and reckless press attacks (Nwankwo: 1994).

To bridge the communication gap at the grassroots, the Federal Government, in collaboration with the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations organized a nationwide public relations workshop for local government chairmen, deputy chairmen, supervisory councillors and council secretaries throughout the federation. The workshop, which took place from 10th to 14th April, 1989, was mounted to drive home the relevance of public relations in the running of government business at the local level. The public relations consciousness generated during and after the workshop was instrumental to the institutionalization of public relations procedures and practices at the third tier of government. However, the problem all along has been the shallowness of practice, just like in other tiers of government.

The practice of public administration in Nigeria is cast in a steep superordinate-subordinate mould. Although the Nigerian public administrative structure has undergone some changes over the years, in terms of organization and stratification (i.e. local, state and federal), the colonial intellectual structure which informed its establishment has continued to determine the direction and pattern of government business both at policy-making and policy implementation levels.

In the face of mounting bureaucratic red-tapism and administrative hierarchicalism, the relationships between the employer and the employees, on the one hand, and those among workers themselves, on the other hand, are largely cold and impersonal, resulting in an "order system" that inhibits and, in many cases, kills initiative and enterprise. The prevailing work environment is that in which the subordinate is expected to shiver and tremble at the sight of his or her superior, while at the same time carrying out orders from the superior without question or suggestion. Under this dictatorial condition, the subordinate is

discouraged from giving out his or her best.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the administrative problems and crises in the Nigerian public sector are traceable to the insensibility and insularity of the superordinate class from the subordinate class at various governmental, agency and parastatal levels of the national economy. To a very large extent, the administrative crises in the Nigerian public sector emanate from the fact that the administrative structure is devoid of a persuasive communication mechanism which is supposed to institute and promote a commonality of interest and concern between the public workforce and the leadership. At the governmental level, the lack of understanding of the communication imperative for administrative efficiency is, indeed, very deep. The gross misunderstanding is, no doubt, responsible for the incessant industrial disputes in Nigeria - a situation that has arisen as a result of governmental inability to "talk it over" with workers via a meaningful dialogue, instead of resorting to threats of punishment, dismissal and the like (see Madunagu: 1980; Ubeku: 1983; and Etiebet: 1996).

At the institutional, agency and parastatal strata, the same "command administration" is in vogue as superiors continue to thicken the line between them and their subordinates. Under this bossy condition, the work relationships are marked with queries, and other punitive actions which would have been easily and friendly resolved through dialogue. It is this high level of acrimony that made Udoji Commission to observe *inter alia*:

(The) spirit of animosity exists between superiors and subordinates (in the Nigerian public service). One sometimes gets the impression in observing human relations in the public service that Nigerians do not like each other.

On her part, the Nigerian nation has suffered terribly in terms of underdevelopment as a result of this rancorous situation. Nwosu (1980) paints a graphic picture of this despicable situation in the following words:

The effect of the strained relationship among the various groups in the public service leads to delays, concentration of authority and reluctance to delegate responsibility. It also results into inefficient use of available talents. In a country where plan implementation is retarded by inadequate executive capacity, it is unnecessary for the available high-level manpower to work at cross-purposes all in the defense of cadre or group interests.

From the foregoing, it is as clear as pikestaff that the practice of public administration in Nigeria is at opposite with the public relations angle as being advocated here. When compared with the developed world perspective, the obvious difference is further thrown into relief as we can see from the following.

Public Administration Practice in the Developed World

Public administration practice in the developed world is a fitting example of the administrative expression: "influence is power". At both policy-making and policy-implementation levels, this Lasswellian dictum constitutes the determinative force in government business.

In the United States, for instance, public administration is organized in the context of decision-making by public means. In view of the fact that it is "concerned with public government, that is, with the direction and self-direction of large communities of people" (Saffell: 1973), the relationship between the superordinate and the subordinate classes is characterized by level-headedness and probity. Under such condition, "whenever governmental means are used to deal with conflict, the decisions arrived at are widely accepted, not ...from fear of punishment, or coercion but ...from a belief that it is morally right and proper to do so" (Dahl: 1970). This is also the situation in Britain and Germany.

In the developed world today, government business rests on the pillars of public diplomacy - a policy tool that is borrowed from the field of international relations and which, in policy-making and policy-implementation circles, has become a euphemism for public relations. Public diplomacy is premised on the belief that the environment of public administration must be made to reflect the rapid changes in the modern society. It is in this context that the concept of public management in the developed world is interpreted. The critical issue is the management of public programmes so as to achieve high efficiency and effectiveness and, more importantly, be perceived as such (Rainey: 1990). As a policy tool with a very high communication imperative content, public diplomacy is viewed as a conduit via which to achieve the democratization of the policy process (Rourke: 1995). This view is informed by the fact that the realities of modern public administration have placed both the leader and the led in public glare more than ever before.

As we can see from the above example, one obvious fact that stands out, like a wart on nose, when we compare the Nigerian model of public administration with that of the developed world is the differential

interpretation of what *people* and *subordinates* mean in the administrative process. In the former, they do not matter. In the latter, they do.

Early enough, the developed world recognized the sterling advantages of public relations in public administration. Although they originated the classical organizational theories, they were quick to read between the lines and did not hesitate to incorporate public relations in the process of managing both local and international affairs. With the rapid developments in the spheres of economy, politics, technology and the social sector, the developed economies saw the need to communicate the government's points of view and policies to the workforce so as to create better understanding of governmental actions and win public approval. For instance, the secret behind Japanese bureaucracy today is said to be the application of Theory A-Z which stresses continuous consultations with the workforce. It is also believed that the efficiency and effectiveness of the British and the United States bureaucracies is the outcome of their radical departure from the classical systems of management to a worker-centered administration.

Public relations has a lot to do for public administration. In policy initiation/formulation and implementation, in the management of public programmes, in the application of legislation and general personnel management.

Public Relations and Productivity

Productivity is a subject matter that is universally acknowledged as a critical factor in the process of economic growth and by implication, in the management of human resources for effective public administration (Shonekan: 1997). Bannock et al. (1978:360) define productivity as a measure of "the rate at which output flows from the use of given amounts of factors of production". They assert that if factors are not used efficiently, productivity needs improvements "since by definition, more output can be produced from given amount of input". For this reason, productivity is normally measured by expressing output as a ratio to a selected input so that the selected input "will give name to the productivity measure, e.g. labour productivity, capital productivity, and land productivity". Our concern here, however, is on worker productivity wherein productivity is simply defined as output per worker that can be measured "as an average over a period of time - an hour, a month of a year" (Shonekan: 1997).

This issue of worker output has to be viewed from the perspectives of efficiency and effectiveness in the process of accomplishing a given

task. Efficiency and effectiveness in this context refer to the economy and high-level proficiency as well as the ability to bring about intended results (in this case, an efficient and effective accomplishment of a given task). To this end, the worker is expected to cause desired effects, produce required results, be actively operative, be capable and effective so as to match the "ratio of useful work to energy expended" (Akpan: 1982).

These worker expectations cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be realized without applying the persuasive strategies of public relations to create and sustain a worker-friendly environment.

To achieve efficiency in the public sector of the national economy, today's public administration should be worker-centered. The top-down "us-and-them" orientation must give way to effective vertical and horizontal interactions to give a sense of belonging to the worker. There should be peaceful co-existence "between followers and leaders as a prerequisite for growth, development, progress... just as the boss may initiate an idea, so has the follower the right to contribute to the idea before it becomes a policy" (Kayode: 1993). The era of "take it or leave it", not subject to opinions or discussions is gone. Moreover, modern approaches to effective public administration lay emphasis on employee empowerment as a vital tool of employee motivation. This points up the vital issue of employee-management relations.

Employee-Management Relations

The management of the relationship between employees and management is increasingly emerging as the centre-point of organizational performance. This is especially so in a multi-layered personnel setting.

Employee-management relations, in a nutshell, involves, among other things, ensuring two-way flow of communication between the management and the employees in an organization (employee communications). It also entails working with the industrial relations and personnel departments in order to ensure industrial harmony by creating and maintaining good employee motivation practices, managing industrial crises and assisting in industrial relations practice such as collective bargaining (Yesufu: 1980).

The two-way communication strategy calls for continuous interaction and dialogue between employees and management so as to avoid communication gaps and generate goodwill. To achieve this, management must apply the strategies of public relations in the light of the established principles of industrial democracy, which employ tenets

of labour laws to redeem the rights and obligations of the worker in relation to the employment contract.

Conclusion

As we have seen, today's public administration has become people-focused. This, in turn, has given rise to an administrative style that seeks to generate and sustain a worker-friendly environment to enable the worker perform out of a sense of duty. One factor that has become clear from our analysis is that in every government activity, every public policy or programme, every reform or system change, there is an opportunity for the application of public relations strategies. The idea is to look good by building and maintaining a favourable image through good deeds that would improve the quality of life in society.

As we have shown, public relations has a crucial role to play in the process of managing public organizations. To improve output (productivity) and at the same time court a favourable image in the eyes of the relevant publics, public administration must have to be based on the ethical principle of doing good and avoiding evil (*bonum faciendum, malumque vitandum*). In this mode, the human dimension of organization must take precedence over any other consideration. When we relegate the "human factor" to the background in favour of the "bureaucratic factor", we are killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Since public administration implies service to the public, the competence of those who administer public organizations is not only to be evaluated on the basis of the "ability or capability to discharge the duties and responsibilities designated, but also to win the confidence and trust of those to whom the person exercising responsibility is accountable, as well as those over whom authority and power are exercised" (Akpan: 1982). This challenge of public administration constitutes the reason for public relations in public administration.

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