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### Crisis Management in Public Relations

Organisations make strenuous efforts to ensure harmony in their operational environment. This is very important because any corporate body, be it a business enterprise, social or government bureaucracy, will achieve greater success when it operates in an orderly and conducive environment. Public relations as a management tool, ensures that harmony exists in the workplace.

Although industrial peace is desirable for maximum output, it ultimately ensures greater return-on-investments as in the case of manufacturing or goodwill in service-rendering enterprises. Industrial harmony is seldom achieved all of the time because of the complex nature of business, social and political environment. Crisis is, therefore, inevitable in the workplace. Crisis may occur as a result of conflicting roles of government professing to optimise welfare of its citizens, and at the same time charging higher taxes and usually not being able to meet the most basic of these needs. Basically, crisis has to do with the unusual.

The purpose of business enterprises is to make maximum profit for its owners. On the other hand, government exists to provide the basics of good living for its citizens. This is done by providing the essential services which private enterprises, individuals, groups and non-governmental organisations can either not provide profitably or that are so basic for human

existence that government must come in to provide. Crisis has been found as one of the reasons which may lead to a quick end to business activities. The case of oil producing areas of Nigeria is very relevant here. For several years, government has been lifting crude oil from the Delta areas of the country. Oil rose to become the prime revenue earner for the government in the early 1970s. Ironically, government and the oil companies did not pay corresponding attention to the developmental needs of the areas. The immediate result is environmental neglect and degradation of the oil-producing areas. In other countries where the rule of law is followed, oil exploration, as in Nigeria's situation, would have come to a halt through litigation and other forms of legitimate protests. The people in the oil producing areas of Nigeria have become poorer as a result of the oil and gas projects. Ever since the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) and other groups declared Shell Petroleum *persona non grata*, that part of the country has known no real peace. The incarceration and trial of its leaders over alleged wrongdoings with all the government might, generated more furore and poor image especially for the government's human rights record. Conversely, some of the dead activists were honoured with awards and international recognition for the struggle against environmental degradation and concern for human life. Since then, there had been several cases of youths holding expatriate workers hostage, the Jesse fire disaster, communal strife and shutdowns of oil company operations.

In the past, little or no attention was paid to crisis as an important aspect of public relations activities, but the changing face of business environment and the greater awareness of those who are usually affected by crisis have made it clear that the success of an enterprise may hinge upon how it can manage crisis that may occur. Crisis, to a large extent, is an unanticipated occurrence that affects adversely the reputational stability of an enterprise such that the basic objectives of setting up that organisation may no longer be realised. In many cases, crisis may

occur as a result of error in management's judgment, equipment failure or sabotage from various sources.

A commercial plane had just undergone all maintenance checks successfully, and certified fit by the engineers. Moments after take-off and with a full load of passengers, the huge aircraft burst into flames. Or, take the case of a major oil pipeline which has been carrying crude oil through a vast area of swamp for several years in an oil-producing community, without a single event. The community woke up one morning and discovered to its surprise that the pipeline in the heavily populated farming area had burst, causing enormous oil spillage never witnessed before. Fresh water was polluted which resulted in serious damage to human activities, crop, flora, fauna and the entire ecosystem. These are just examples of crises that may occur within the workplace and which certainly would affect the overall objective of the enterprise. Do we expect the management of any of these affected concerns to throw up its arms with gusto and claim that the accidents were caused by "an act of God"? It is in the realisation of the possibility of crisis, that modern day managers work in anticipation of crisis and fashion out plans to confront the unexpected. Crisis management, as an important aspect of public relations, brings an organisation to terms with its environment. Crisis can be contained if the causes and the resolution plans, which in most cases are not deliberate, are communicated to those who are in one way or the other affected or may be affected by the crisis. These groups range from internal to external publics of that organisation. Broken down, they are the stakeholders, customers and publics which include staff, business owners, government, local communities, and so on.

In order to determine who the publics of an organisation are, a simple question will assist here: will any group or person be affected in any way by the incident? If the answer to the question is yes, then that group or person constitutes a public of that organisation. That group or person therefore deserves special attention and must be treated as such, in anticipating solutions

to crisis. The nature and behaviour of an enterprise will therefore determine its publics, although it could be remarked that stakeholders are hardly of same behaviour in organisations. There are, however, publics which an organisation must have. These include shareholders, consumers/customers staff and, possibly, the regulatory bodies.

## Managing Crisis

The reduction of the world to what is now known as the 'global village' has made the entire world to be dominated by news as they are breaking. News could be positive or negative. Our concern is news of crisis, which affects the practice of public relations. Because of the interdependence of the entire world, an event occurring in one part of the globe automatically becomes relevant and known instantly in several other parts of the world. The impending and frequent crises in the Middle East provide a good reference here. It has been known to affect the global oil market (such that Nigeria earned an unbudgeted \$12 billion during the Gulf War of 1991). However, Nigeria was enmeshed in a crisis of confidence as the people enquired what happened to the windfall during these periods. Such debacle created image crisis on Nigeria's leadership of the period.

At this point, some public relations case studies on managing crisis would be relevant. Many documented examples abound in the Western world, particularly the United States of America with such classic cases as *Nestle and infant formula in the third world countries*; *Ford Motor Company and the Pinto*; *Perrier and Benzene*; *Union Carbide and Bhopal*; *Johnson & Johnson and Tylenol*; and *Exxon and the Valdez*. However, not many cases of crises in Nigeria have been duly documented. Of recent, some crises situations via air crashes, food poisoning, bird flu, and several others that have occurred would require detailed research and concrete documentation before it can become ready learning resource as those earlier mentioned in the US.

In June 1993, the military government in Nigeria annulled an

acclaimed free and fair election after eight tortuous years of transition to democracy. Unfortunately, the annulment went awry. Successive spokespersons for the military government, adept at the game of brinkmanship, came out worst. They simply abandoned the most important weapon in combating crisis – truth. They distorted and concealed information, as they revelled in trivialities of acquiring chieftaincy titles, solidarity rallies and arranged village receptions. All these brought the wrath of the people, through unprecedented riots and crippling strikes. The continuous fall in the standard of education, comatose health sector and a crippled economy compounded the problems. The External Affairs Ministers made the USA and the UK their campaign grounds, instead of Nigeria where they needed the understanding and cooperation most. The result of the efforts were counterproductive and disastrous, as the country's officials were refused entry visa to many countries of the world. The circus shows on the *CNN*, organised by unknown consultants all over the world at astronomical costs, were pitiful. One would have expected that government would recognise Nigerian public relations practitioners as its best bet to address the self-inflicted and homegrown crisis. In a *ThisDay* (a Nigerian daily) editorial, a pragmatic solution towards resolving the continued poor image of Nigeria was proposed:

It goes without saying, the futility of arguing abroad a patently domestic issue, which could be better handled at home. We think that for all the hard sell by the Foreign Affairs Minister, the best advert for a product is the product itself. No matter the amount of razzmatazz, a bad product is unsellable. And Nigeria is less than a good product.

Towards the end of 1994, a documentary was broadcast by the television giant in the USA, Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) on Nigeria. CBS, in the media world, is one of the three biggest network television stations in USA. The programme,

which was dubbed 30 Minutes Documentary on corruption in Nigeria, focused primarily on the growing rate of corruption in Nigeria. The storyline began with a foreign Methodist Missionary whom dupes (called 419 operators) were planning to fleece. The missionary was invited to visit Nigeria to see things for himself so that a large sum of money which some supposed Nigerian businessmen were trying to remit to the United States for evangelism could sail through the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN). The Reverend gentleman had sent some money to Nigeria earlier and was getting suspicious when requests for more money were still coming from his Nigerian 'friends'. And more importantly, several cases of duping had been reported about Nigerians in the foreign media to make him worry.

It was against this background that CBS became interested in the story. Armed with concealed and sophisticated recording equipment, the team arrived Murtala Mohammed Airport, Nigeria's prime gateway to be confronted with large-scale bribery as demanded from the journalists by immigration/customs officials. Promptly, the hidden cameras swung into action recording every event. Having paid all the bribes, the team was taken to several places by their hosts and again on camera. The team procured all sorts of documents including passports, birth certificates, and letter-headed papers at very ridiculous prices, which were all recorded by the hidden camera. The high point of the mission was when an aid to the Minister of Information and Culture allegedly demanded gratification to enable the team interview him. At the end of the visit, the team returned to the United States to air the documentary, which reported Nigeria in not too glowing terms. The report spread like wildfire to various parts of the world to confirm what the world had been told about Nigeria. Reactions from Lagos and Abuja were confusing because Nigeria was literally caught in her own game.

The incident posed big public relations challenge to the country, which was thoroughly mismanaged. First, the Nigerian Mission in the United States issued a statement condemning the

documentary saying that it was a ploy to paint Nigeria black. That official line of reaction was re-echoed in Lagos and Abuja by various government functionaries. Whereas government spokesperson saw in the documentary a grand conspiracy to blackmail Nigeria by the CBS team, the Chief of General Staff still saw the need to order an investigation into the matter with a view to curbing the excesses of immigration and customs officials. The documentary, to many Nigerians, rather interestingly, was an indictment of public functionaries of corruption and gross ineptitude. These divergent views are not expected in crisis. The things that ought to be done were neglected. The steps that were taken, some of them right, were done half-heartedly. There was no clear and definite plan to make them result-oriented.

For all intents and purposes, the crisis was mismanaged and Nigeria became worse for it. As serious as it was, it ought to have afforded Nigeria a big chance for a major overhaul of the entire customs system, which certainly would have led to an improved image. For instance, Nigeria should have admitted that the documentary was faultless by punishing the culprits openly. Government ought to have issued a statement regretting the incidence. This should have been followed by a definite plan of action to stamp out corruption at the border posts in the country. In this way, visitors would be assured of fair dealings when they come for business in Nigeria. This is possible only if government is courageous and morally upright to pursue such agenda. The actions taken several months after was medicine-after-death. The denial and denunciation of the documentary, as if the film was not shot in Nigeria was unfortunate and poor public relations.

## **Diplomatic Gaffe**

Ambassador Walter Carrington was head of the United States of America's mission in Nigeria. It is trite to say that the US government hinges its relationship with any nation on the emerging issues of democracy and human rights. Nigeria had

performed woefully in these two areas as a military-led government and worse still, during botched June 12, 1993 Presidential Elections. Consequent upon these failings, the United States of America, the European Union and many other nations imposed sanctions of different dimensions on the military leadership and its civilian apologists to ensure that sincere and measurable progress were made in democratising the country and a marked improvement was achieved in upholding human rights. The summary execution of the Ogoni nine led to the suspension of Nigeria from the Commonwealth. Given these scenarios, which group would the American representative relate with? Naturally, he shared a common objective of democratisation, good governance and better human rights records with the opposition and the collectivity of the human rights community. Towards the end of Carrington's four years duty tour, many organisations and individuals gave him befitting farewell parties. One of such parties by the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) was disrupted by security agents backed by the amorphous "Operation Sweep Force." In the aftermath of this ill-advised official high-handedness, the Nigeria Police issued three different statements in defence of its undiplomatic action – the men were dispatched to keep the peace in the area; arms concealment in the vicinity of the send-off and, that the organisers did not inform the police to give protection!

Worse still, while the Lagos Police Chief was denying any harassment by his men, the Nigerian Ambassador to the United States was pleading to the effect that the incidence was "most unfortunate". A nation desirous of mending fences with other nations of the world through huge dollar bills on publicity blitz in the international media was not expected to undermine the efforts by refusing to make progress in the critical areas needing redress. Therein lies the problem of propaganda and image laundering. It is better to build a **good** reputation through doing what is right, than adopting guerilla diplomatic tactics.

In this instance, democratisation, civil rule and improved

human rights were a better preoccupation than image laundering. Government's ability to manage crisis in this case was faulty and counterproductive. The case will remain a living reference point of undiplomatic public relations.

The third case study in crisis management is very familiar to public relations students because of its remarkable success in grave crisis situation. It was in 1982 when a news story broke out in the United States of America that some deaths were linked to the use of *Tylenol*, a popular over-the-counter headache remedy. This product was manufactured and is still being manufactured by *Johnson & Johnson*, a US pharmaceutical company.

Within a short while, a correlation was established between the deaths and *Tylenol* usage, which was discovered later to have been laced with poisonous cyanide at the point of sale as per the findings of forensic experts. This posed a serious challenge to *Johnson & Johnson* as the future of its fast moving product was at stake. Confronting the issue was a big problem for *Johnson & Johnson* as some consultants were thinking that *Johnson & Johnson* might have to change the brand name in order to gain public confidence. Expectedly, the United States vibrant media network focused all attention on the *Tylenol* incident. Managing the crisis centred mainly on the response that came from *Johnson & Johnson* with James Burke, the CEO in the lead. Immediately the news broke out, the New Jersey-based company moved very fast concentrating its efforts on *protecting the lives of millions of its customers*. Immediate recall of a hundred million dollar worth of 31 million bottles of *Tylenol* capsules from shelves was embarked upon while giving all support to the police to track down the culprits. The company publicised all its actions and steps taken to arrest the situation. The company followed up with a research on the tamper-proof bottle aimed at ensuring that "never again" would their product be sabotaged. In fact, the incident led to the adaptation of the tamper-proof cover for *Tylenol* bottles. In addition to this consumer protection, the company set up a large

information outfit where corporate information on the incident got disseminated to the publics. This is a good public relations approach to crisis management.

The case of **Exxon Valdez Oil Spill** was a sharp contrast and an example of poor crisis management. Long after the incidence, the company continued to suffer poor public image, as an uncaring corporate body. *Exxon's* top executives inadvertently but studiously avoided facing the public whose understanding and empathy was most needed. They left their public image in the hands of speculators, and the US Coast Guards. Legions of reporters, several environmental groups and the state of Alaska who knew little or nothing about *Exxon* came in to fill in the information vacuum created. William Small in *Public Relations Review* puts it this way:

No company ever spent more to repair the damages of an industrial accident. None worked harder to marshal an army (a Navy) to fight the damages to the environment. No corporation had to cover so much territory to repair the results. And probably no other company ever got a more damaging portrayal in the media. An example of how not to manage a crisis!

Mobil Producing Nigeria Unlimited is a responsible corporate body that has replayed in real life the textbook "theories" of managing crisis with admirable success. The advertisement on page 59 is typical of good crisis management.

Similarly, Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) Nigeria grossly mismanaged the crisis that ensued after the **Ogoni nine** were tried, convicted and executed (United Nations Report) in Nigeria by making inflammatory and materialistic statements to the effect that they would go ahead with their \$4 billion Liquefied Natural Gas project. While it was convenient for Shell to claim being a non-political organisation, it was clear to everyone else that the entire crisis was all about oil politics around which the Nigerian economy revolves. This show of insensitivity by a

corporate body made Shell's operations in the future a difficult task. Notwithstanding the grand standing fact that the Liquefied Natural Gas project would be most beneficial to the people, experience has always shown that the indigenes were only given menial jobs while expatriates lived like kings. They did not have water, light and even roads. The reaction of President Mandela's government in South Africa to Shell was instructive of the great obstacles it had to scale for many years after the incident. It admonished Shell and requested it to protect human rights in the Niger Delta area. If nothing else, Shell ought to have recognised the vital role which humanising the crisis could play in assuaging interested parties, particularly the restive youths. Several corporate entities when confronted with crisis such as this may choose to localise the problem, allude it to God's wish, deny or blame their perceived opponents. This was not the case with *Johnson & Johnson*. The company faced its predicament and came out of it stronger. While Nigeria got knocks for not facing up to an obvious case of official corruption at her most important airport, *Johnson & Johnson* earned the trust of its stakeholders, customers and the entire staff, such that when the product got relaunched to the market, it gained prompt acceptance. Today, Tylenol is still a leading brand name in analgesics in the United States of America.

## **Guidelines for Handling Public Relations Crises**

No matter what an organisation may do to prevent or banish the thoughts of having crises, they have a way of creeping in surreptitiously. Apart from the incidents mentioned earlier on, the Nigerian oil industry now encounters increased protest actions from the oil communities ranging from outright sabotage, hostage taking, communal clashes and transferred aggression. Worst of all these crises was the Jesse fire disaster which left hundreds of people burnt to death as people tried to scavenge oil from burst pipes. This is indicative of the very poor and low level impact of community relations and social responsibilities of oil companies.

Since it is generally agreed that we literally have to live with crises such as plane crash like ADC airline in 1997, Belview plane crash in Ogun State (2005) which claimed 117 lives on board, and Sosoliso plane crash at Port Harcourt Airport (2005) which also claimed sixty-five lives including many school children, it is advised that crisis should be anticipated and plans mapped out to combat them as they occur. It is better to have plans even if there will never be any need to activate them. But best still, crises should be prevented through being safety conscious and paying every attention to details. In case of crisis when it occurs, the following will be of help in managing the situation:

- (a) Understand the nature, extent and impact of the crisis.
- (b) Activate your action plan immediately and accept blames and responsibility. Never deny or denounce the existing problems.
- (c) Operate an open policy and promptly communicate actions to all stakeholders.
- (d) Map out plans to solve the problem so that it will never reoccur.
- (e) Show concern to victims. Let affected parties understand that you care.
- (f) Do not count your losses in public. Let that be for management consumption only.
- (g) Be ready to pay compensation to victims. It is your cross. Bear it boldly.
- (h) The chief executive should lead the way in communicating crisis resolution programmes – self-evasiveness is not advisable.

Add to the above, a ten-point crisis resolution strategies by Pat Utomi (1994):

- (a) Have a review of your business and anticipate potential crises, no matter how remote they may seem.

- (b) Stimulate the anticipated crises and its possible dimensions. Prepare game plan for handling each plausible dimension of the crisis in question. Identify operating colleagues whose activities would be affected by the crisis and what roles they would play in crisis situation. Then review corporate strategy and the vision of the organisation within the context of the crisis.
- (c) Plan for and locate a central crisis communication centre, a place the media and all those concerned can come for information or telephone to get updates.
- (d) Agree with top management on their role in the crisis and how to get them involved.
- (e) In your general media relations, educate the press on your philosophy towards an issue, which could at some unpredictable date become a source of crisis.
- (f) When crisis comes, first try to understand its nature as quickly as possible. The anticipated crisis may come in a different form, which may alter your contingency plans.
- (g) Carefully select a crisis team and delimit their level of authority to avoid dangerous slips.
- (h) Never avoid answering a question, only answer cleverly when unsure. "No comment" is the worst mistake.
- (i) Always communicate action taken for the benefit of the stakeholders who may be affected by the crisis. Talking is not enough (like in WAIC or political promises), positive action is better.
- (j) Be very careful with statistics. All members of the crisis team must have the same brief. They must speak with one voice and act in unison. When not certain, say so and say why you are not certain.

In crisis management, therefore, communication is the key word. It is not enough to act positively, it is equally very important to speak out and meet the people for their mutual understanding and empathy, which are essential in terms of resolving the crises. Organisations that are confronted with serious crisis of this magnitude must have the will and the skill to speak clearly, consistently and with one voice.

Pro-active planning would therefore seem to be the most effective way to contain known (anticipated) and unknown (unexpected) crises whenever they do occur. As optimistic as we may wish to be in terms of believing in our expertise and contingency plans for tackling crises, experience has shown that crisis still happen with such speed that all we can do is face it frontally with our pre-planned actions. When organisations fail to contain in-plant crisis, this could lead to loss of jobs by all categories of staff, closure of the plant, bankruptcy, serious negative media exposure and incalculable damage done to its public rating and more disastrously unedifying exit from the stock exchange which would spell doom for all the stakeholders. This requires that all means possible should be employed to avoid crisis and if it comes, facing it squarely and professionally would bring back the company even much stronger to the marketplace.