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THE CHALLENGES OF GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS: THE WAY FORWARD

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If our society continues to function in a democratic way through change and adjustment, through accommodation of varying groups and viewpoint of one another, through progress at uneven rates of the constituent elements that make up society, there will be even greater necessity than there is today for a public relations practitioner. He will be helpful in evaluating the adjustments and maladjustments between the groups that make up the society, will advise his clients or employers on their attitudes and actions will help them achieve their goals, and will interpret client or employer organisation to the public concerned.

— Edward Bernay's Later Years

The way we analyse and project the practice of public relations today should reflect its future circumstances. The government continues to be the highest employer of public relations practitioners. Yet public relations processes are adopted in an haphazard and inconsistent manner where they exist, and in some cases they simply are non-existent. Organisations leave the management of their reputation in the hands of people who do not have the requisite knowledge and information on the organisation and its boundary audiences. Coupled with this is the abuse of the concept of chief executive officers being the chief "image-makers" of their organisations. These "big men" have interpreted this symbolic recognition to be a total takeover of public relations schedules. As the practice becomes more sophisticated,

proactive and challenging, non-professionals would realise it is not a turf for the uninitiated.

Governments the world over have increasingly been communicating better with their various audiences, as people now demand to be consulted and informed as a matter of right rather than a privilege. The counselling role of public relations is needed in every sphere of governance, as the society becomes more and more complicated with economic and political problems. This is even more imperative as the leadership model is shifting from "command and control" to the "inspire and communicate" model. Public relations would be expected to set the agenda for governments, champion constructive change, and advise on societal relations and national ethics. In addition, a thorough understanding of the country's limitations, internal challenges and future opportunities are mines through which only the professionals can manoeuvre.

Even then, the government continues to neglect the abundant resource that the public relations profession can offer in its herculean task of building a new and enduring reputation for Nigeria. Indeed, their local knowledge and being active participants would make their services more cost effective and most beneficial.

Concept of Government

The best government is one that thinks it better to leave as much wealth as possible among the people to let them spend it for goods they know best. The worst government is one that takes as much of the peoples' wealth as possible and then asks how it, the government, ought to spend its surplus wealth.

"That Government Governs Best Which Governs Least" —
James V. Schall, *Reflections on the Necessity of Government*.

After many years of independence, Nigeria's colonial past and the decades of military misgovernance have been continually blamed for the lack of positive development in the social, economic and political spheres. The various governments over the years have inefficiently utilised resources, allowed extreme poverty in the midst of plenty, aided corruption, created bloated bureaucracies, accommodated dictatorial and tyrannical governments (military and civil), and

tolerated abysmal human rights records.

How did we come about the octopus governments around us today? What makes them grow by the day? What can be done to contain the growth and redirect governments to their primary responsibility of providing enabling environment and level playing fields rather than acquiring responsibilities they are not equipped and able to cope with? George Marotta gave six reasons thus:

- a. Bureaucrats are many and are growing at all levels of governance — federal, state and local. The perks of office and job preservation motivates them to keep it growing;
- b. Too much money in the hands of the federal government without adequate planning; resulting in white elephant projects that do not have direct benefit for the people;
- c. The media encourages the growth by its very nature that makes it magnify societal problems. As the saying goes — “bad news sells and the good does not”. What further excuse does the government want for a spending spree?
- d. Electorates are compromised because of perceived benefits from government. As usual, most promises made by politicians are meant to be broken as they see their election as an opportunity to have a big bite at the national cake;
- e. Obsolete programmes are rarely discontinued, rather, they get duplicated with more funds;
- f. Human beings are by nature compassionate. This contributes to big governments. Whereas intellectually and practically, government cannot solve all problems, familial and societal failure encourages it to play “the compassionate state” howbeit ineffectively; and
- g. Bureaucrats and government leaders create or encourage crises to justify expanding government. Military ambition and wars also create bigger governments but after problems have been resolved, the former size is never reverted to and security budget continues to increase.

The current thinking is for governments to revert to their traditional and primary roles of securing “the blessings of liberty”, “establish justice”, and “maintain social order” — not by mandating

outcomes but by setting minimum standards of just conduct and leaving individuals free to pursue their own values within the law. Governments should also be the last resort to solve problems rather than the first. As Fredrick Hayek puts it, "... the more you look to government to solve your problems, the more power that government will have to later oppress you". After all, responsible governance does not require abundant wealth; it only takes discipline, diligence, integrity, prudent management of resources, genuine concern for the weak through the creation of the enabling environment for enterprise and a free democratic system. A combination of these factors would lead to the elusive development lacking in the country.

Public Relations

Democracy encourages communication but are Nigerians necessarily more informed now than they were during the military era? Well, it is evident that the ruling elite are still busy talking among themselves and once in a while they try to reach out to the people that matter most — the grassroots. There is need for political leaders to build meaningful alliances with grassroots organisations and opinion leaders that serve as third-party endorsement capable of boosting and making messages more credible. More than ever before, there is need to make communication reach the high and the lowly with equal impact.

While not boring you with the numerous definitions of public relations, we can as well use Norman Stone's, expression of what public relations can do, to be our guide. He says that public relations:

support business objectives, explain policies, increase awareness, focus attention on issues, encourage informed discussion, help to change perception, opinion and behaviour, influence attitudes, motivate staff, build and sustain "reputation" over time, help to restore "credibility", have some effect on the values of a particular group or of society as a whole.

As public relations practitioners, we operate in every sphere of human endeavour. Our duties are numerous and are as defined by our various organisations. These functions range from the professional to the adjuncts which could be operational, administrative and omnibus. It is important that as professionals who are supposed to know a little about everything pertaining to the management of organisations, the

challenge is for us to be able to fit in and perform well in all fields. This is because the higher you go the more you would be required to contribute strategically to corporate planning and decision-making.

Some of the duties and functions of public relations practitioners, presumably at the management level, include:

- Giving advise on corporate affairs matters;
- Formulating communication related policies;
- Answering local and overseas enquiries and requests;
- Overseeing media, employee and the stakeholders (External & Internal) community;
- Organising and sustaining effective internal and external communications;
- Building and managing reputation;
- Producing Handbooks, Annual Report, Newsletter, News Bulletin, Calendars, Diaries, Seasonal Cards, Handbills, Posters, Promotional Films...;
- Initiating and carrying out information-based research on work programmes;
- Producing promotional films, pictures, slides...
- Overseeing all frontline duty officers — receptionists, telephone operators and security men.
- Drafting speeches for the CEO/Board/Principal Officers.
- Performing such other duties that may be assigned.

Challenges and Opportunities

After establishing what Government is and what it ought to be, it now remains for us to take a look at the challenges that face public relations practitioners and the opportunities that lie ahead.

Leadership

In governance as well as in communication, leadership is critical for achieving developmental goals. Leadership also requires the establishment of a challenging and realistic vision and teamwork. It is the responsibility of communicators to make it known to the leaders that modern statecraft demands building concensus through effective communication. Leaders should be encouraged through definitive informational methods to reject the well-worn military language

(autocratic) management models and metaphors with their implicit message of force and violence. Such expressions as “with immediate effect”, should give way to inclusive decision-making that promotes creativity and gives pride of place to morality.

Organisational leaders may even try the “Management-by-Walkabout” which has proved very successful. It is simply the method whereby the CEO refuses to be locked up in the penthouse but occasionally walks down the corridor and exchanges pleasantries with the staff. Such interactions enable him to know his staff intimately and getting to know what his director and other associates would rather keep away from him. It is when the people cannot experience these changes that they doubt the efficacy of democracy and its dividends.

Ethical Issues

As professional communicators, truth and public interest are critical to the “calling”. One is expected to speak the truth at all times, be the conscience of society, a standardbearer of honour, ethics and integrity. Practitioners are to eschew any conduct likely to bring the society into a state of anarchy. Such negative acts include corruption, abuse of office and neglect of the poor and needy. Addressing ethical dilemmas when they arise, saves organisations from serious social upheavals. Heads of government agencies should begin to see their role in governance as that of the Chief Ethics Officer (CEO). Once leadership is by example, through the adoption of a culture of diligence, accountability and transparency, it would be easy for the followers to perform their individual and collective roles. For as Bernays puts it, “we cannot permit, in the future, one code of ethics for the individual in his business or professional life, and another for his private life”.

Media Relations

Excellent public relations needs the media less than does poor public relations and as organisations depend less on the media, the better their relationship with the media will become.

— James Grunig

I acknowledge the fact that public relations employers and

practitioners see the media as the centre of the practice. Thus, we have unwittingly substituted publicity with public relations. If that is the case, why do we grumble that journalists have taken up all the plum public relations jobs in the land. Most advertisements for public relations jobs are undisguised request for publicists and propagandists. Is that what public relations is about? It is even very ridiculous when "press contacts" is listed among the qualities required.

Through research, the following facts have emerged — "several studies demonstrate that journalists view us as adversaries and rate public relations as one of the least honourable occupations" (Linda Morton). *Wakefield* and *Cottone* sampled some employers on 38 skills of public relations and "public relations releases" was ranked as the fifth most important knowledge/skill area they required from the public relations staff. Of course public relations practitioners themselves ranked producing "Information for releases to the media" as their most important duty.

Too often, press releases appear more targeted at the employers than the media gatekeepers. Studies have shown that less than half of public relations releases are used. Yet public relations sources are responsible for a greater percentage of the news in the media, even if they are slovenly and amateurishly presented. There is need for practitioners to hone in on their writing and presentation skills to achieve better media respectability. Of more importance is the need for public relations executives to recognise the need for a complementary media relationship rather than that of dependency. As for employees who prefer journalists to the professionals, political and economic democratisation will compel a rethink in not too distant future. The difference is clear.

Freedom of Speech and Association

"Freedom of the press ... is not just important to democracy, it is democracy." [Walter Cronkite]. Any government that stifles the press and refuses to allow its citizens to freely associate and speak is living in the 18th and 19th centuries if not farther back.

Freedom to speak and write about public questions is as important