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USING PUBLIC RELATIONS METHODS IN PARLIAMENTARY REPORTING

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Public relations counselling should continue as a great safeguard of a free, democratic competitive society, in which people power remains dominant.

— Edward L. Bernays (1956 & 1981)

The National Assembly deserves to be congratulated for recognising the importance of training and retraining of their officers. This I believe is a result of regular organisational evaluation and strategic planning. This workshop is also very auspicious as the National Assembly is set to commence its onerous legislative responsibilities after a long recess. As the country journeys to a new democratic era, the National Assembly should be given all the support it requires so that we can get it right this time around. Public relations executives and indeed other information managers attending this workshop are enjoined to make the very best of the opportunity.

Our discussion this morning would be hinged on how public relations impinge on the interactivity of the media in the process of governance from the perspective of the legislature. To do this, two definitions of public relations would be our guide — the Mexican Statement (1978) and Philip Lesley's (1976).

Public Relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation

leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest.

— *Frank W. Wylie (PRSA) & Sam Black (IPRA)*
First World Forum in Public Relations, Mexico City, August, 1978.

Public relations is a phenomenon and a necessity in our times. It has been created by forces that increased the tempo of the world, casting people into many diversified groups, all seeking different objectives yet all having to work together toward common advantages and progress...

— *Phillip Lesley (1976)*

These definitions underline the expectations and roles of the practitioner in the organisation he serves. Public relations functions are listed below:

- a. The public relations executive shall normally report directly to the chief executive of the organisation. This situation may vary according to the preference of the CEO and or the governing Board of Directors.
- b. The public relations executive shall be a counsellor to the organisation on major policy issues: from the point of conceptualisation up to the implementation stage of programmes.
- c. He shall ensure effective communication among all the staff of the organisation: from management to other members of staff and vice versa.
- d. He shall facilitate a free flow of communication among workers, peers and executives by encouraging dialogue, counselling, discussion and consultation as a means of solving problems. He shall also promote formal and informal interactions among all categories of staff while still ensuring the hierarchical structure.
- e. He shall avoid employers claim that they want performance but end up paying for attendance. Motivate staff through ensuring job security, satisfaction, good reward system and welfare.
- f. He shall have short-term, medium-term and long-term programme objectives — strategic planning.
- g. Ideally, crisis should be anticipated and prevented through effective coordination of all the organisation's activities. However, unforeseen crisis is bound to occur at one time or the

other. At such periods the contingency plans, made ahead of time should be put to work.

- h. He shall ensure effective media liaison such that there is mutual understanding between the organisation and the media in terms of news requirement and proper presentation of facts to the public.
- i. He shall refrain from making pecuniary interest override the general public interest.
- k. He shall employ as much as possible the use of modern communication technology such as telephone, video, cable network, computer, internet, e-mail, fax and similar gadgets.
- l. The Department shall as much as possible be the mouth, eye, ear and nose of the organisation. The practitioner shall be its mouth-piece and be knowledgeable about the work of the organisation.

These and many other responsibilities determine an ideal public relations department. A public relations functionary from this presentation is clearly the most strategic person in an organisation, provided he is research-oriented, profound in thought and proficient in handling management and other related issues.

The Tasks of a Public Relations Expert

The functions and duties of a public relations expert are numerous. However, some of the duties would be listed out and effort would be made to highlight certain aspects of these tasks and functions for the sake of clarity.

1. Fashioning appropriate public relations policies.
2. Identifying the company's different audiences.
3. Corporate image making.
4. Creating a corporate culture.
5. Establishing appropriate communication within and outside the organisation.
6. Generating awareness of the company's (products and) services.
7. Performing management function i.e, organisational counselling.
8. Producing in-house journals, annual reports, handbooks etc.
9. Formulating and actualising a public relations policy.
10. Management of information in the interest of good public relations.

11. Arrangement of publicity for corporate activities and programmes.
12. Liaisoning and consultation with corporate public — internal and external.
13. Being a good citizen and engaging in active community relations.
14. Production of mementos i.e. Dairies, Calendars etc. (all these have been banned for obvious reasons in the public service).
15. Policy issues analysis and management research.

The Qualities of a Public Relations Practitioner

To perform these functions using the basic principles of public relations appropriately, the practitioners would be expected to possess these qualities:

- a. An ability to communicate clearly and concisely, both orally and in writing.
- b. An ability to quickly understand complicated situations and explain them in simple terms.
- c. An ability to appreciate the “organisation’s” objectives and a desire to explain them.
- d. An ability to handle several subjects without being exasperated
- e. An alertness to political situations.
- f. An even temper and an acceptance, without bitterness, of rejected advice, yet a determination to press home a sincerely held opinion.
- g. A knowledge of what the media want and how they “tick” and how to make use, where appropriate, of the tools of the trade.
- h. A good knowledge of the “organisation and its niche” or the ability to learn this quickly.
- i. An understanding of people and sympathy with their problems — including members and fellow officers.
- j. Experience in the tools of communication of one sort or another and preferably several sorts.
- k. An in-born ability to act as a full-time organiser and a part-time manager.
- l. An appropriate qualification and membership of the “Nigerian Institute of Public Relations”.

- m. A sincere belief that democratic government, for all its faults, is a worthwhile government. (Militocracy and dictatorship are antithetical to public relations goals).

Geoffrey A.H. Lewis (1973) *Public Relations For Local Government*, Cox & Wyman Ltd., London.

From the above, it may seem that public relations officers are super beings. This is not so as they are but humans with their limitations and can make mistakes. In fact, the more human public relations people are, the better they will be on the job. Public relations is not an impersonal profession, rather it is people oriented. What is important is to know the aims and objectives of the organisation and the capacity to mobilise the human and material resources to achieve the set goals.

Political Public Relations

As public relations practitioners in the National Assembly, you cannot afford to be partisan in the handling of issues that require your attention. You are expected to be an unbiased facilitator, an in-house gatekeeper and counsellor. All political parties have their programmes and it is left for them to adopt appropriate strategies to win power. As operatives of the National Assembly, you would be required to have a special understanding of how the political machinery works. Some of the points to note include:

1. The existence of formal organs of parties; which generically you can call the party machinery.
2. Formal opinion formers and leaders; these are people holding leadership positions.
3. Informal opinion formers and leaders; these are important persons who hold no recognised or accepted positions, but who are very influential either because of their achievements in the society, or because of what they do, have done, or can do for the progress of the party.
4. A recognition that in politics, consensus building through lobbying is a special skill that is constantly applied in order to understand specific causes.

The Tools of Public Relations

To achieve the preceding objectives, give effect to the functions and generally ensure professionalism, some basic tools of public relations are employed. Public relations is a dynamic and interactive profession. It generates contents for the mass media while the latter provides the vital channels for its messages. What then are the tools that public relations uses to achieve its goals? For the purpose of this discussion, three categories of these tools (channels) would be considered — Electronic Media, Print Media and Other Media.”

Electronic Media

This comprises Television, Radio, Film (slides, Projectors etc.), Video News Release (VNR), Audio News Release (ANR), Telecommunications (internet, computer, e-mail, cable network, satellite etc.).

Print Media

For the print media, the following are the commonest used tools: Press release, publications [newsletter, annual report, handbooks/brochures, news bulletin, journal (technical/specialised), fact sheets, collected speeches, feature articles].

Other Media

Press conference, face-to-face/person-to-person interview, lobbying, billboard, memo, mailing (speaking letters), media/facility visits, trade fairs/exhibition, annual general meeting and sponsorship.

In using these tools, it is important that public relations practitioners should know when, where, what and how to use them.

In Nigeria, as in other countries of the world, the trend is for government to operate a strong information dissemination system. Government public affairs have grown proportionately to its jumbo bureaucracy such that one could say there is over establishment without the corresponding development that is expected. Many reasons account for this, some of which are: increased urbanisation of the population; increased societal complexity; increased mobility; increased demands by the people from government owing to decline in the quality of life and increased scrutiny by articulate people.

These and other factors literally force government to provide extensive public information in order to develop public understanding of its programmes and policies. The public affairs specialist charged with government relations therefore needs to keep in mind the objectives of government information efforts. Quoted below are some objectives and methods of public information by William Regan, former Director of Public Affairs, US Civil Service Commission.

1. Inform the public about governance
 - (a) Represents accurately his or her organisation's policies on economic and political matters to government, employees, shareholders, community interests, and others.
 - (b) Serves always as a source of reliable information discussing the varied aspects of complex public issues within the context and constraints of the advocacy role.
 - (c) Recognises diverse viewpoints within the public policy process, knowing that disagreement on issues is both inevitable and healthy.
2. The Public Affairs Professional seeks to protect the integrity of the public policy process and the political system, and therefore:
 - a. Publicly acknowledges his or her role as a legitimate participant in the public policy process and discloses whatever work-related information the law requires.
 - b. Knows, respects and abides by Federal and State Laws that apply to lobbying and related public affairs activities.
 - c. Knows and respects the laws governing campaign finance and other political activities, and abides by the letter and intent of those laws.
3. The Public Affairs Professional understands the inter-relation of business interests with the larger public interests, and therefore:
 - a. Endeavours to ensure that responsible and diverse external interests and views concerning the needs of society are considered within the corporate decision-making process.
 - b. Bears the responsibility for management review of public policies which may bring corporate interests into conflict with other interests.

- c. Acknowledges dual obligations —
 - * to advocate the interests of his or her employer, and
 - * to preserve the openness and integrity of the democratic process.
- d. Presents to his or her employer an accurate assessment of the political and social realities that may affect corporate operations.

Source: Public Affairs Council, Washington, USA.

These expectations from the public affairs executives have remained underdeveloped as a result of the long years of military governance in Nigeria. Indeed, the press and other communication practitioners have been severely infected by the nuances of dictatorial government in their use of language “with immediate effect”, the attendant force and a brutalisation of the citizens psyche. This has led to a situation where the press have become so combative and pessimistic about the society they live in. Rather than moderate the events around them, they constantly inflame and heat up the polity. In all these, the public affairs executive, usually with a media background is also culpable.

Conclusion

Public relations thrives better in a democratic state. The decades of military rule in Nigeria have been an impossible nightmare as citizen's rights are routinely abused, coupled with the fact that freedom of expression was a rare privilege. This presenter therefore looks forward to the day and time when Nigerians can once again enjoy civil and people-oriented government. The style of reporting the affairs of the National Assembly would be greatly enhanced with continuous training of this type and in different areas of skill since democracy has not been practised for long in the country.

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