

PARADIGM SHIFT IN GOVERNMENT PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMMES: A VIABLE ANTIDOTE TO ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Paradigm Shift in Government Public Relations Programmes: Viable Antidote to Attitudinal and Behavioral Change in Nigeria. The rationale behind this paper is predicated on the endemic failure of most government programmes, meant to create mutual understanding and goodwill between the citizenry and the government at all levels in Nigeria. Some of the government public relations programmes that have triggered off aspersions by the public are SURE-P, Zero Pot- Hole in Port Harcourt, Fight Against Maternal and Infant Mortality (MDGs 4 and 5), Massive Road Constructions in Port Harcourt, National Technical and Vocational Education Programme in Secondary Schools. Turn around maintenance of Nigerian refineries, etc. Consequently, the paper notes that the growing culture of impunity in planning and execution of public programme by the government agents and contractors is a major bane of public programme both at national and state levels. The paper also observed that the absence of integrity plan and integrity court in the nation for the quick trial of culprits without compromise is another reason why most government PR programmes suffer comatose. More so, the paper found that the absence of "carrot and stick" model in the management of government programmes is another hiccups to the success of the programmes. Consequently the following antidotes are recommended in order to addressing the multidimensional problems. Some of which are: introduction of integrity plan, establishment of integrity court, effective monitory and evaluation of government PR programmes and the adoption of carrot and stick model in execution of public major PR programmes or projects.

Keywords: paradigm Shift, Government Public Relations, Antidote.

Introduction

Public relations is inescapable in every government be it democratic or autocratic in nature. This is because PR activities are central to the dynamics of governance or

administration. Therefore, government irrespective of its political ideology or colouration, needs ample of Public relations in its conceptualization, planning and implementation of public policies and programmes in order to wooing the support and acceptance of its citizenry.

The absence of PR in any government breeds suspicion, unconstructive criticism and crisis in the governance of a nation, state or local government. Ipso facto, PR is sacrosanct in the life and style of the three tiers system on of governance in Nigeria structure of federalism.

However, critics of PR may argue that government has the Army, Air-force, Navy, Police, Customs, immigration, State Security Service, Para-Military Agencies among other security outfits. Therefore, does not need public relations to attract public support and win public acceptance of government policies and programmes. In spite of this paraphernalia of power by the government, she still needs ample of public relations programmes to create goodwill and mutual understanding between the public and herself.

Consequently, the first problem likely to be faced by Public relations Practitioners with the government is how to get people interested in government Public relations programmes because of lack of confidence in government in meeting the yearnings and aspirations of the public via developmental programmes.

Sometimes, individuals, civil society organizations, the media, religious leaders, etc. will seek to draw the attention of the government to the basic needs of the publics or citizenry through media advocacy and other channels of interpersonal communication without making appreciable progress because of the activities of the hired guns and spin doctors of the government who see such patriotic move as unpatriotic or distraction on the part of government rather than playing their role as management adviser in their organizations.

Hence, calling the exponents of such initiative as unpatriotic citizens. In most cases, when projects and programmes of public interest are executed, they neither carry the beneficiaries along from the initiation stage to the implementation on the projects or programmes efficiently and effectively. For example SURE-P that is meant to add value to the lives of the public's particularly the indigent members of the society has become a major political tool of state governors and their political acolytes.

Similarly, has the impact of NAPEP well felt by the poor citizens of this country? How far has poverty Alleviation Programmes of various states achieved their goals? How far has massive road construction policy and zero pot-hole programme in Rivers State achieved the objectives for which they are formulated?

How effective has Federal Government Turn around Refinery Project achieved its goals? Is the level of development project in Greater Port Harcourt commiserating to billions of naira spent on the project? Why has Niger Delta Ministry unable to commission one single project since the establishment of the ministry over three years ago?

Why are many government public relations programmes and projects not people participatory in Nigerian nation in spite of the new trend of development model globally? These and many more are some of the worries and concerns of this paper.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria is presently bedeviled with a lot of socio-economic and developmental challenges, and how to tackle them by the government has been a source of worry by the

Successive governments in the country. To address these plethora; of problems past and present governments have adopted series of PR programmes, and paradigms. Some worth their salt while some were colossal failure and some are still failing in spite the presence of Public relations Practitioners in the planning and implementation of such programmes. It is in view of this, that this paper seeks to unravel new paradigm in managing government public relations programmes which the paper sees as antidote to attitudinal and behavioral change among Nigeria citizenry be it internal or external.

Conceptual Framework

This paper adopts the Transfer Process Model by Frank Jepkins (1982) as its conceptual framework and guiding light. Its major message is that public relations strategies can and should be used in attempt to change over or convert people's attitudes and behaviors from their negative state to positive state in order to achieve organizational goals.

This concept further holds that public relations programmes can be used to change Hostility to Sympathy, Prejudice to Acceptance; Apathy to Interest and Ignorance to knowledge. This concept or model can be applied to any PR problem or issue for a quick response.

Description of keywords

Some catchwords in the abstract of this paper are described to demystify their meanings. Among which are:

Paradigm Shift

This is a systematic and deliberate shift or change in the blueprint, template or model used in managing public relations programmes and issues.

Government Public Relations

This is a deliberate and sustained effort of government to create a sustainable goodwill and mutual understanding between her and the governed. This is achieved by conscious and dedicated commitment of the government to meet the yearnings and aspirations of both the internal and external publics.

Antidote

This is described in the context of this paper as a tonic or elixir in redeeming and managing the stigmatized image and reputation of government and its key players through effective public relations practice devoid of unethical PR activities.

Discourse on Public Relations by Government

Public relations by government can be described as a deliberate, sustainable and systematic efforts by the government and its agencies to conceptualize, plan and implement people-participatory projects and programmes that are intended to create symbiotic relationship between the government and its public (citizenry) in order to muster public acceptability and respect.

This can further be referred to all forms of relevant planned communications by the government as a distinct entity to its various publics be it internal or external.

According to Onagajo (2007, p.119) government here refers to the three levels of Federal, State and Local government as well as their regulatory agencies. Stretching the concept of government public relations further, one can rightly say that it involves all activities of the government: Federal State or Local Government intended to improve the lives and times of the citizenry through provision of social amenities and enhancement of their socio-economic status for the specific objectives of creating good will and mutual understanding between the government and the governed (publics).

Thus, government engages the services of PR Practitioners strategically in order to inform, educate and persuade the publics to accept her programmes through media campaigns or radio, television, newspaper and other channels of above the-line-media. Some of these campaigns often fail to achieve predetermined goals because of lack of effective PR paradigm. Successful PR campaign is conceptualized, planned, organized and systematically implemented by PR practitioners.

This is because government public relations programmes are expressions of government's concern for societal problems and the needs of the publics. The role of PR practitioner in government programmes in the wisdom of (Center and Jackson, (2007), is that of a creator and implementer of public-oriented programmes. This role calls for the handling of:

*Strategy, planning and research programmes
Design civic participation, Government and educational
liaison meetings and events, Media placement and
relations. Preparation of print, audio and visual materials,
Interviews and news conferences.*

Some government public relations programmes spring out of crisis, emergency situation or criticism from the media practitioners or civil society organization as a result of their perceived injustice against the publics by the government. For example, the Amnesty Program offered to ex-militants in the Niger Delta in 2009 came as a result of aggressive agitations of the ex-militants. To many, that crisis is a turning point for good in the lives of the ex-militants in particular and Nigeria at large. Although, through adherence to the ethics in all times, etc (Center & Jackson, 2007, pp. 365-366).

In Nigeria, Nigerian Institute of Public Relations Ethical Code provides that her professional (PR Practitioner) should conduct his or her activities with proper regard to public interest. The code also states that PR Practitioners should be duty bound at all times to respect the truth and shall not disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly and shall take proper care to scrutinize all information before dissemination. The NIPR Ethics further states that PR Practitioner whether in public service or private sector should respect the moral principles of the universal declaration of "Human Rights" and the freedom entrenched in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria in the performance of his or her duties.

But to what extent has a PR Practitioner in government, Federal, State or Local government service adhered to the ethics and codes of NIPR in the discharge of his or her roles in the interest of the general public.

However, since the whole idea behind public relations in government is to build and improve the image of the government before its internal and external publics, therefore, the

“Mr. Fixer” who is the PR-man should practice his profession in line with acceptable standard particularly in planning and implementation of PR programmes and projects.

The paper notes that the current government PR programmes paradigm of:

- PR programme proposal
- Planning of the programme
- Adequate publicity with mixed media
- Drawing of budgets for the PR programme
- Implementation of PR programme and
- Post media event on the implementation of the programme should be considered for a paradigm shift in order to induce positive attitudinal and behavioral change amongst the publics in Nigeria.

This paper observes that the above highlighted PR paradigm lacks some significant elements that can trigger positive attitude and behaviour in the lives of the publics. Therefore, it is no longer fashionable. Consequently, modification or a total paradigm shift is unavoidable.

Why Government PR Programmes and Paradigm are failing

- Lack of people-participatory PR programmes approach.
- Lack of carrot and stick model in management of PR programmes.
- Absence of integrity plan in execution of government PR programmes
- Lack of integrity among implementers of government PR programmes.
- Absence of integrity court for trial of deviant characters in the implementation of government PR programmes or projects.
- Lack of flying the kite or trial balloon in proposing government PR projects.
- The growing culture of impunity and corruption among implementers of government PR programmes.
- Excessive use of black and white propaganda in support of government PR programmes and policies.
- Near to absence of monitoring and evaluation of the cost, process and impact of development programmes or projects by government agents.
- Insincerity of government in execution of its PR programmes.
- Lack of community policing of government projects by the host community or beneficiaries particularly at the grassroots.
- Sense of apathy in some government PR Programmes by the publics.
- Lack of research-oriented PR programmes.
- Diversion and misappropriation of public fund meant for PR programmes.
- Growing quest for wealth without work among government acolytes and contractors handling public projects.

Recommended Strategies and Paradigm for Managing Government PR Programmes

Step 1 Research:

This is concerned with “Needs Assessment’ of the environment, community, town, city, village or people in order to find out what the people need in terms of social amenities or value

Addition PR project or programmes. This paper observes that it is not good enough to build Mono Rail project while the people need construction of roads. So, it is duty bound for PR-man to embark on research so as to propose people oriented projects.

Step 2: Programme Proposal:

This involves coming up with a robust PR project after the needs assessment activity has been concluded.

Step 3: Flying the Kite:

This deals with the trial balloon activity. It is more or less testing the water to find out the nature and creation therein before commencement of PR programmes. It is also a deliberate leakage of the programme to the people before execution. The core aim of this exercise is to ascertain the level of public acceptability of the PR programmes. If the acceptance is high, the programme would be laudable and if otherwise, the programme would be diametrical to the yearnings and aspirations of the people.

Step 4: Strategic People – Participatory Planning Approach

This involves carrying the potential beneficiaries of the PR programme along from the point of planning to the point of execution of the programme in order to guarantee community policing of the programme or project and indeed ascertain the efficacy of the programme. Time frame for the actualization of the programme should be set out.

Step 5: Introduction and implementation of Integrity Plan

This PR paradigm believes that the culture of impunity and corruption in Nigeria are major bane of PR programmes. Therefore, the implementers of the PR programme should be under obligation to sign and seal an integrity plan to be prepared by an “integrity court” against defaulting. Consequently, this paper advocates for establishment of integrity court. The personnel of the court should consist of the following groups:

- (i) Representatives of religious leaders (clergymen)
- (ii) Representatives of civil society organizations
- (iii) Representatives of the media
- (iv) Representatives of antigrowth agencies
- (v) Representatives of the security agencies
- (vi) Representatives of the judiciary

This action is aimed to prosecute defaulters speedily irrespective of whose ox is gored.

Step 6: Pre programme Publicity

This involves notifying the public on the proposed PR programme and the efforts made by the stakeholders to ensure transparency, probity and actualization of the programme on record time without blemish.

Step 7: Drawing of Realistic Budget

Realistic budget should be drawn for the project to avoid unnecessary variation in the cost of the programme or project somersault. This has been one of the causes of project abandonment in Nigeria today.

Step 8: PR Programmes Implementation

Deliberate, conscious and sincere commitment should be made by the PR- practitioner to ensure that the programme is carried out religiously. Where the hired experts seem to deviate from the spelt out process, the PR-man should inform quickly his management or authority concerned or serve as a whistle blower.

Step 9: Management, Monitoring and Evaluation or PR Programme

At this stage, a PR Practitioner should collaborate with stakeholders in ensuring the execution of management plans and directs the process of development of the PR programmes to facilitate the realization of the programme within the specified time frame. This is followed by aggressive monitoring and evaluation of the process, cost and impact of the project on the end-users. The monitoring here involves continuous data gathering and analysis process to assess the PR programme and compare it with the target performance. Whereas, evaluation in this context is concerned with a systematic and objective measurement of the results achieved by the PR programme or project being carried out in order to ascertain its relevance, efficiency, coherence, implementation, process, cost, impact, acceptability, sustainability, access, failure, etc. the evaluation can be done mid-term and at the end of the programme execution.

Step 10: Carrot and Stick Approach

This approach encourages efficiency and effectiveness in managing organizations. Therefore, the adoption of this model would stimulate positive attitudinal and behavioural change in managing government public relations programmes. In this approach, “carrot” is the reward given to those whose positive actions are encouraging in execution of major government public relations programmes and the “Stick” here means punishment for those who demonstrated unethical standards in the course of execution of the programme or project. This will serve as deterrent to others.

Step 11: Adequate Publicity

After carrot and stick approach has been used, comes adequate publicity using with mixed media system should be done by the PR-man in government without hyping the success of the programme. This in other words, can be called post PR programme media events. This is because good performance plus adequate publicity by an organization equals to public relations.

Conclusion

We like to conclude in this paper by drawing attention to the new thinking in management of PR programme for project especially government sponsored ones that flying the kite or strategic research, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the process, cost and impact of the programmes or projects on the end-users is sacrosanct since government PR programme are people-centric. We like to be quoted that strategic people-participatory approach in management of government public relations programmes provides a leeway to winning public acceptance of development programme in Nigeria because of its inclusiveness. Therefore, we advocate for its adoption by PR practitioners in government and even in corporate organizations since it has the capacity to stimulate development that will

Touch the lives of government publics positively. This is a cannon call for a paradigm shift in the ways and manner in which government public relations programmes are carried out.

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