PUBLIC RELATIONS PROACTIVE APPROACH: EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Public relations proactive approach as an effective institutional conflict management, which involves taking appropriate measure to either prevent crisis before it occurs or control it promptly when it arises. The paper exposes the causes of conflict, types of conflict and the effects of conflict, and the need for Public Relations effectiveness in managing conflict in Nigeria. The empirical secondary data was employed for this study. The secondary sources included already existing records dealing with various aspects of previous work that made up of published and unpublished works: books, Internet, articles and journals. The finding shows that Nigeria as a nation prefers reactive approach to conflict management rather than proactive measures. It concludes that the conflict prevention will be successful, only when the underlying sources of conflict are addressed and ameliorated through adopting and applying proactive principles of Public Relations. The study also recommended that establishment of grievance procedure by which the members of the institution can make any complaint formally, through the displaying of a suggestion box which would encourage people to voice out their grievances safely.

Keywords: Conflict, Resolution, Crisis, Public relations, Issues management, *Conflict Management*

INTRODUCTION

In human relations there is bound to be conflicts due to differences in the way people perceive things, their divergent interest needs, goals, and personalities. No society can survive without conflict, but can thrive better under discordant voices. Conflict is inevitable in human society, including marriage institutions, church, community, organization etc. Therefore, conflict should be seen as normal and unavoidable.

Acceptance of conflict in human society means that, individuals involved can compromise and negotiate openly to resolve conflict. It is only when conflicts are badly handled that we have resentment, aggression or hostile attitudes that define themselves in crisis. In any case, conflicts do not always result in crisis because conflicts are strong shakers for positive change. Truly, if we re-educate ourselves to new methods of resolving conflicts, we can learn constructive way to deal with our differences.

Our society has changed from primitive towards informational and technological stage. If our educational institutions in Nigeria, should learn to adjust to this change, and new methods of resolving conflict without crisis, will afford them the opportunity to utilize the change for harmonious existence, with both their internal and eternal public[s].

The human world, God' priceless gift to mankind, is at the verge of being extinct-squished through the deliberate actions and inactions of man. Everywhere in the world today, there is chilling news of terrorism, wars, and unprecedented military pounding of Afghanistan by the Americans; the incessant daily bombing of Israeli- Palestinian suicide bombing, employees clashing with employers etc.

Nigeria for instance, witnessed a good number of conflicts and crises which include: the 'Egbesu' instigated Delta crisis, the Ijaw Urhobo crisis, the Ife-Modakeke crisis, the Shagamu, Ketu OPC, Kaduna, Sokoto and Sharia crisis, waves of religious crises, political unrest etc.

Educational institutions of all levels, especially tertiary institutions in Nigeria are not excluded from having conflicts. Nigerian Universities are also a-washed with a good number of conflicts and crises such as: Kafaru Tinubu vs Students crisis 1974; Ali must Go vs. student crisis on 1978; Rice crisis vs. Ahmadu Bello University 1981; Accident vs. Ali University Ekpoma crisis on 1988 etc. To recast on the crises, riots and rampaging exercises by students in their various institutions in Nigeria cannot be expressed, not to talk of employee/employers clashes with strike action and demonstrations. These conflicts, if it was properly handled and prevented through the use of Public Relations principles of pro-active approach, it wouldn't have escalated into crises. This is because good pre-crisis planning could have involved communication in preventing the crisis. It is argued that since the management of Nigeria institutions underutilize

Public Relations in the act of managing crisis, made some of the controllable conflicts metamorphosed into full-blown crises.

Statement of the Problem

The new millennium is the era in which three months old children go to work at crèche just like their busy parents who neither feed them nor give them proper parental care. That means, the home for the modern African child is the Crèche and Kindergarten. This is a negligent of parental duties and complete shift from the "Divine purpose" or order. This is not in alignment with the old adage that a" well breast-fed child grows a noble character" neither does it show-cases the fact that proper parental up-bringing is vital in child's character molding.

White, [1995], says that parents are fashion driven in today's' world that they have no time for training the children., no time for prayer, no time for Bible study and no time for helping the little ones to be acquainted with God. Hence the parental care is shifted to kindergarten teachers. The implication is that the children are left at the "Owners risk". The mass media, new information technologies and traveling abroad have turned the table upside down. "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold", the youths no longer respect their elders.

Objectives of the Study

- To how Public Relations proactive approaches are effective in managing conflict situations.
- To establish that a proactive approach of public relations principle is the best philosophy for addressing issues that can lead to crisis for national growth and sustainability.
- To identify and discuss the underlying causes of conflict in Nigeria Universities.

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the importance of adopting proactive approach as an effective conflict resolution management in Nigeria Universities rather than reactive measures. The quantitative data analysis based on the empirical secondary data was employed for this work. The secondary sources dealing with various aspects of previous work done which made up of published works: books, articles and journals, Internet etc. were used

Conceptual Analysis, Definition and Explanations

The devastating effect of conflict in Nigeria, especially in the Universities attracts the Structural /Six Hubs Wheel Model of Conflict Management by Nwosu, [2004].

Figure 1. Structural /Six Hubs Wheel Model of Conflict Management
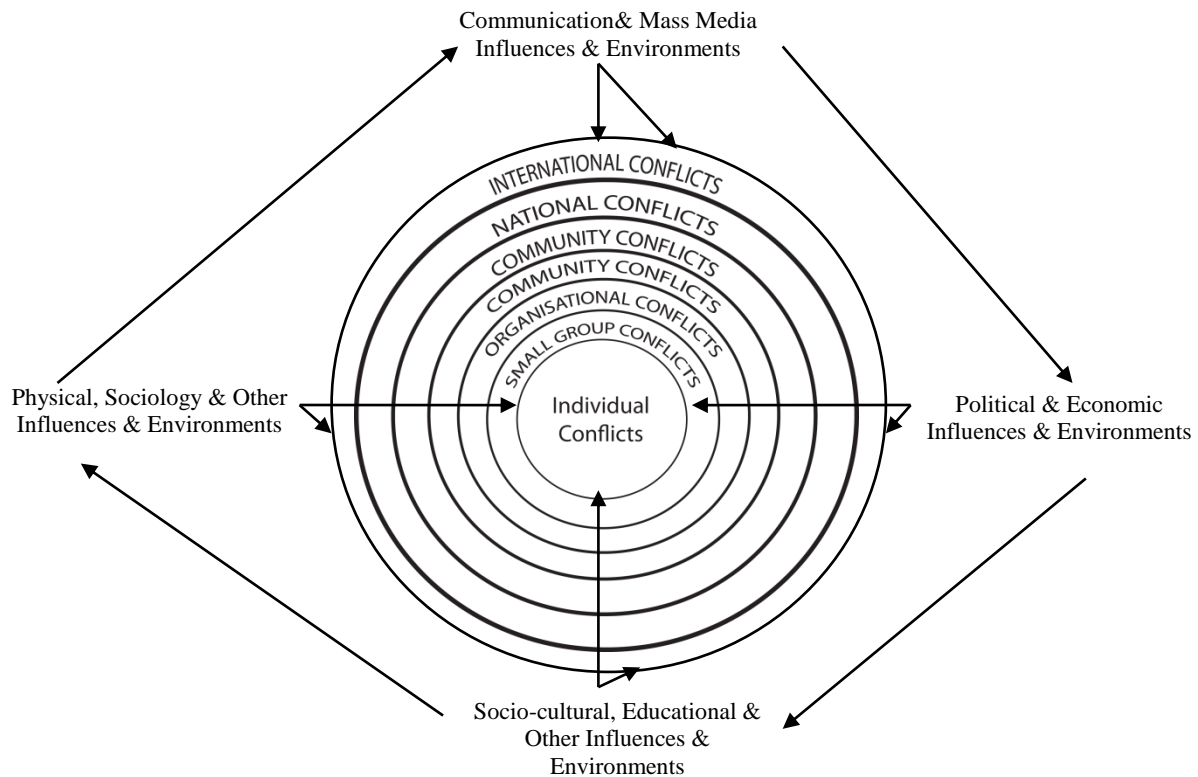
Source: Nwosu, I. E. [2004]

This model identifies and describes the various major forms of conflict in most societies which encapsulates the other minor forms of conflict like intrapersonal, family, institutional conflict, environmental, ethnic, racial etc. The model exposes the various environmental factors which impinge upon these different types of conflict and which affect their occurrences, outcomes, resolution and their management. It also shows the special place of the communication and mass media, environment and their influences in the resolution and management of conflicts. It goes further to show that the root of all these conflicts is the individual or human beings. Therefore, this model serves as a vital building block in any attempt to come up with a Holistic Theory of Conflict Management, because conflict at any level needs to be properly managed in human existence.

Acceptance of conflict in human society means that individuals involved can compromise and negotiate openly to resolve conflict. It is only when conflicts are badly handled that we have resentment, aggression or hostile attitudes that define themselves in crisis. In any case, conflicts do not always result in crisis, but it is always strong strikers for positive change. Crisis can be defined as "any event, issue, occurrence or situation that could be described as a turning

point, for better or for worse, or as "a period of heightened uncertainty that increases the need to plan, and a point in time in which external and internal pressures change objectives, operatives and operational practices of an organization, Nwosu [1996]. Based on the definition, conflict or crisis has both positive and negative impacts. Both of them need proper handling through Public relations proactive conflict management approaches and principles.

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What is conflict?

Dubrin [1978] sees conflict as opposition of persons or forces that gives rise to some tension. In essence it is a kind of disagreement or opposition between groups, individuals or between the organization and an individual or group. Nwosu [2004] defines conflict as behavior between parties whose interests are or appear to be incompatible or clashing.

Hage [1980] asserts that organization conflict means "disagreement between the organizational 'means' or ends or both. Basically, conflict is of two types. They are: interest conflict and affective conflict.

[a] **Interest conflict** occurs when individuals or organizations seek personal material gain or power and status, or when an individuals' are motivated by self-interest and by the need for status and recognition, they are inclined to pursue their own interests resulting in conflict when these are at cross-purposes with others.

[b] **Affective conflict** results from clashes between parties who hold different opinions, values and norms. The conflict here is not over resources rather, it is philosophical and attitudinal involving basic personality differences. When two individuals argue over political, religious, aesthetic or philosophical differences, there is very little to be gained other than ego satisfaction from propounding one's views. The more dogmatic the individuals involved, the more likely it is that conflict will occur. Most disputes within institutions or organizations are a blend of interest and affective conflicts.

Causes of Conflicts

This paper identifies and discusses three classes of factors that cause conflicts which are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive, but will aid to understand conflict and conflict management process at various levels. These are: intrapersonal factors, interpersonal and the structural-functional factors.

Intrapersonal conflict occurrence takes place within an individual, and several factors usually have independent impacts on the individual to make him face a confliction situation. Managing this level of conflict or to understand it is very important because one cannot be at peace with others or the group, if he or she is not at peace with himself. These intrapersonal conflicts have their roots in the psychological make-up: personality of the individual concerned, individual perception of situations, other people or event, individual interests, wants, needs or expectations, especially when these are at conflict with those of other people. Skchammer,(2001) opines that intrapersonal conflicts manifest in form of:

- Approach-approach Conflict which requires the individual to choose or make decision between two positive or attractive alternatives.

- Avoidance-avoidance Conflict which occurs in the individual when he or she has to make a choice or decision between two equally unattractive options [i.e. between the devil and the deep blue sea] and

- Approach –avoidance Conflict in which the individual faces a single goal that has both positive end negatives.

Interpersonal Factors Conflicts

Nwosu [2004] opines that interpersonal conflicts are caused by such factors as: lingering of grudges, faulty attributions, faulty interpersonal communication [e.g. unclear instructions or messages], inappropriate criticism, all these are related to improper communication and personal behavior traits [e.g. being too autocratic, argumentative or conflict-prone].

The Structural-Functional Factors Conflicts

Thomas (2010) opines that the structural-functional causes of conflicts have their roots in interaction between organizational or group structures. They arise from the structures and functions of groups. They are usually generated by such factors as scarce resources, ambiguity over responsibilities or jurisdictions, inadequately applied reward systems, power structure conflicting interests or expectations, overlapping or unclear job boundaries, inadequate intra-group and extra-group communication, unreasonable policies, standards and rules,

unreasonable deadline or extreme time pressure, poor decision making system or approach etc.

Characteristics of conflict

To manage conflicts effectively, educators and other managers should recognize conflict situations whenever they occur even before they become manifest to the ordinary man from its latent stages or forms. Nwosu [2004[asserts that the characteristic of any conflict that will help us to recognize conflict situations include the following:

- When winning the conflict battle becomes more important to the parties involved than finding lasting solution to it.
- When the parties involved begin to conceal information from each other or to disseminate distorted information in form of misinformation or adopting negative propaganda. At this point effective communication and mass media are urgently needed.
- When each group becomes more cohesive and those who plan for reconciliation are punished, at this juncture strict conformity with the group position on the conflict is not only expected but demanded.
- When contact with the opposite party or group is strongly discouraged except under formalized permitted and restricted conditions.
- When the opposite party or group is negatively stereotyped and the image or reputation on one's position or group is boosted [Effective public relations, or communication is needed]

What is Conflict Resolution?

Resolution is an act of finding a satisfactory way of dealing with a problem or difficulty, or an act of finding a satisfactory method or approach in solving a problem or difficulty. Thus, resolution is an act of finding a solution to a problem or a conflict.

Conflict resolution is but a part of conflict management which is wider in scope. Many conflict resolution techniques can be employed at different stages of managing conflict and at various levels which will discuss later.

Effects of Conflicts

Dubrin and Williams [1978] list some positive effects of conflict, if properly and promptly managed:

- Unity may be achieved when disagreements are resolved.

- It may usher in innovation and better ideas in an institution

- Conflict can foster interest and creativity

- Conflicting parties may be fostered to explain their views which may aid understanding and enable people to appreciate other people's feelings

- It offers people the opportunity to test their capabilities –tolerance, forgiveness, acceptability, and peaceful co-existence.

But if the conflict is not resolved promptly and properly it can lead to:

- Mental in balance: The mental health of the party [ies] may be negatively affected. In such cases there can be skirmish, war, killing, divorce or avoidance.

- The goals of the organization may be distorted and this is the most important adverse effect of conflict.

- Chaos and confusion, reduces cooperation and undermines common goals.

- Inefficiency can be the resultant effect of conflict in any situation.

What is Crisis?

Crisis can be defined as "any event, issue, occurrence or situation that could be described as a turning point, for better or for worse. It could also be defined as "a period of heightened uncertainty that increases the need to plan, and a point in time in which external and internal pressures change objectives, operatives and operational practices

 of an organization [institution]" [Nwosu,2004]. From the above definition we can see that conflict or crisis has both positive and negative impacts, but both of them need proper handling through pro-active approach of public relations principles.

What is Public Relations?

According to the Mexican statement [1979], Public relations is the act and social sciences of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest.

Ajala [2005], defines Public relations as…..the distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, acceptance and co-operation between an organization and its Publics, involves the management of problems or issues, helps management to keep informed on the responsive to [SIC] public opinion, defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest, helps management to

keep abreast of and effectively utilize warning system to help anticipate trends, and use research and sound ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

Nwosu [2004] states that Pubic relations is the profession that influences public opinion or attitude in such a positive direction, understanding and acceptance; it establishes a two-way communication to ensure mutual understanding, resolve conflicts of interest between individuals, organizations and its publics.

Public relations Proactive Strategies and Methods

Effective Communication

Sam Black [2002] contends that the purpose of public relations practice is to establish two-way communication seeking common ground or areas of mutual interest and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information. Basically, the major cause of conflict is misunderstanding. So, to resolve conflict, means to achieve an understanding. Work for a mutual interest, and the achievement of understanding is largely dependent on information, education and communication. Therefore, communication is at the root of resolving conflict situation.

Public relations principles recognize that a pro-active approach is the best philosophy for addressing issues that lead to conflict or crisis. Supporting this view, Akinyemi [1993:99], opines that "the best tool for managing crisis is making sure that crisis do not arise by using the regular Public relations strategy of a planned and sustained programme of communication". Nkwocha [1999:192] advises that they should employ "Crisis Management" rather than management of crisis. This means taking appropriate measures to prevent crisis before it occurs. It is pro-active, preventive, and pre-planned in nature. On the other hand, "Management of crisis" literally means managing a crisis that has occurred. It involves taking sporadic, largely uncoordinated actions to quench the crisis. It is fire brigade and reactive in nature. Tools for pro-active crisis management are: [A] Information [b] knowledge [c] Communication [IKC].

Issues Management

Issues management is a method of controlling different variables that impinges on the organization to avoid the occurrence of conflict or successfully reduce its impacts before it spread like the wild fire. Public relations practitioners have discovered from research and experience that a fire brigade approach means wait until it occurs and we'll fight it, is not only expensive, it is also a dangerous method of conflict management. This has given impetus to issues management as a public relations tool of managing conflict.

Nwosu [2004:115] contents that 'issues management involves tracking, analyzing, collating, presentation of data and making practical recommendation to the management on issues and problems that may have negative or positive impact on the growth and survival of the organization'. It involves a lot of research or data collection and analysis. And it is futuristic, advisory, predictive or forecasting-oriented in its recommendations**.**

Understanding and Managing Intentions

Robins [2001], opines that understanding and managing intentions of the parties involved in a conflict is very important as a method of conflict management. Intentions in this context refers to the decisions to act in a given conflict situation. Under these methods four distinct conflict techniques are identified:

Collaborating Technique is a win-win conflict management technique in which no one really loses. It is you-win; I win technique that stresses assertive but cooperative behavior in conflict situations. This technique is necessary when the objective is to learn, to find unifying solutions or to merge different insights or perspectives.

Accommodating involves the technique of being unassertive and cooperative, and used when one decides to place he/her opponent's interest above he/her own for one reason or the other, especially to have the conflict end at all cost. This technique is usually vital when one knows that he or she is clearly wrong or when you want a superior or better viewpoint to prevail and or when you want your subordinates to develop by learning from their mistakes.

Compromising is a conflict management technique in which there is no clear winner or no clear loser because each party to the conflict is willing and capable of giving up something in the interest of harmony, such as when goals are important but not worth the effort.

Avoiding is a conflict management technique which involves being unassertive and uncooperative at the same time It is a way of ignoring or suppressing conflict with the hope that they will either disappear or remain at manageable levels without escalating. In actual sense, this technique hardly manages anything in a conflict situation. It should be used in conflict situations in which the issues are trivial or when more important issues are pressing

Negotiation and Bargaining

Negotiation and bargaining constitute an important method of conflict management in various settings and at various levels, which requires a lot of skills especially communications and strategic control of emotions or psychological dispositions during the process. In negotiation and bargaining each side to the conflict exchange offers and concessions and reach agreements on these with the sole purpose of ending the conflict.

Greenberg and Baron, [2002], contends that the key factors that influence the success or failure of the negotiation and bargaining process include the tactics adopted by the parties involved in the conflict or focus adopted by the negotiators and the participants' overall attitude towards the process.

Third Party Involvement Conflict Management Methods

Third party involvement can take the form of mediation in which a third party assists in getting a negotiated agreement or when it seems impossible for the parties in conflict to reach agreements or resolve the conflict by themselves [e.g. ASSU versus Federal government of Nigeria Conflict]

Albert [2001] asserts that the third party mediation can be formal or informal, and can also take the form of Arbitration in which a third party is given authority to dictate the terms of settlement of the conflict. Three types of arbitrations are notable: **Binding** arbitration in which the two sides agree in advance to accept the terms of the agreement; the **Conventional arbitration** in which the arbitrator can offer terms of agreement as he whishes; The **Final offer arbitration** in which the arbitrator or third party merely chooses between the final offers made by the parties to the dispute

Promotion of Mutual Interest Method

Theorists posit that in every conflict situation, there are interests which are mutual to the parties, and that the common enemy is the conflict itself which they should jointly work to eliminate. The success means "reaching a solution acceptable to both sides" and this success is attained by the participants in the conflict recognizing that they are partners in common pursuit.

Public Relations Philosophy of Truth and full Information:

Sam [1989] emphasizes that "every public relations course must be based on truth and full information. Management can succeed only when the band policy is ethical and the means used are right. Truth should not be colored and defined alongside race, people, religion, place or polities. God is truth and truth is God. He is a God of justice also.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The discussion of data gotten from the secondary data, which includes already existing records dealing with various aspects of the work being done on conflict vs. universities in Nigeria and how it was handled. Based on the empirical research the following conflict situations were exposed:

Students vs. Conflict in Nigeria Universities

Mrs. G. O. Apampa on February 1, 1971 Vs Students University of Ibadan

The students of Nnamde Azikiwe Hall of the University of Ibadan, made complaints against their Cafeteria Management that Mrs. G.O. Apampa was corrupt, incompetent and exhibition of poor public relations and should be removed for their Hall. The University authorities were unwilling to grant the students' request. That lead to student demonstration which was intended to be a peaceful demonstration, but it flared up into violence when the Vice-Chancellor Prof. T.A, Lambo invited the police to the campus which caused the death of Adekunle Adepoju a student of Agriculture in the University of Ibadan.

Acting Police Commissioner, Kafaru Tinubu vs Students February 1, 1974

The students of the University of Ibadan sought for the cooperation of the Police through the Acting Police Commissioner, Kafaru Tinubu in their commemoration of Adekunle Adepoju Memorial Day. The Commissioner who latter appeared with a team of police ordered them to throw tear-gas canisters at the students. The tear-gas fumes broke the procession and there was commotion and confusion at the graveyard. The students fought back with stones and sticks. In solidarity movement, the violence spread to Obafemi Awolowo University, IIe Ife, University of Lagos, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and the University of Benin which led to the destruction of school propriety and death of some students.

Amina Hall Crisis on the 23rd of May, 1986

The students on their anniversary day for the students that were killed on May 23rd 1978, they were compelled to pack out of the campus, where they were caned, beaten, and some were killed by mobile policemen in which Yahaya Abdullah, Peter Aizuogu, Hamila Farida Mustapha and Isa Oyakilole were victims of crisis.

Based on the above findings by Akpenpuun [2006], it was discovered that management of crisis which is reactive in nature, sporadic and fire brigade approach is the method adopted as means to conflict resolution method in Nigeria University.

From all indications, this work has been able to investigate its subject matter –Public relations proactive approach as an effective institutional conflict management.

CONCLUSION

In Africa and Nigeria in particular, the underlying sources of conflict are underdevelopment and deprivation, negligent of parental duties, poverty and spiritual insensitivity, overpopulation, environmental stress, refugee and migration flows. Therefore, conflict prevention will be

successful only when the underlying sources of conflict or violence are addressed and ameliorated by adopting and applying proactive principles of public relations rather than reactive approach to conflict resolution.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Institutional management should train themselves and the employees in various areas of crisis management, and to have a crisis management plan
- Another strategy to unveil conflict in any institution is by establishing grievance procedure through which the members of the institution can make any complaint formally, and by displaying of suggestion box which will encourage people to voice out their grievances.
- Most importantly, is to avoid revenge, counter attack and blame shifting and character assassination. Commitment to transparency and honesty are best principles of proactive approach which must imbed by the institutional management cadres.
- Seminar and conferences can be used as an avenue for training the entire stakeholders.

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