

Reconstructing our Mentality for Efficiency during Crisis: An Analysis of the Role Expected of Local Government Information Officers

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Abstract

Crisis is a product of unresolved conflicts and conflicts are the resultant effects of unresolved issues. Issues and conflicts abound in the day to day activities of any human endeavour. In other words, no human interaction can be devoid of conflicts as they (conflicts) themselves are healthy for organisations. However, when allowed to degenerate, conflicts lead to crisis and not all crisis situations are healthy in human endeavours. At the local government level, information officers are supposed to be image makers and information managers. Regrettably, not many of them are allowed to perform their role with all authority at the council level. However, whenever crisis erupts, they are often looked upon to perform magic in dealing with the public by their chief executives. This paper, therefore examines the role of information officers in crisis management at the council level. It reminds them that they are foremost public relations and information managers as against the civil servant mentality they carry. It also discusses the levels/stages in crisis and the skills required of the information officers in handling crisis situations as well as media selections and how to earn journalists respect. It concludes that information officers must be part of the decision making process in information generation and dissemination, and media relations in order to exhibit their skills of relationship building and goodwill.

Keywords: . Issues .Conflict .Crisis management .Information officers

INTRODUCTION

Crisis is precipitated by unresolved conflicts and conflicts are caused by unresolved issues. In other words, issues when not properly addressed lead to conflict and conflicts not properly managed snowball into crisis. Issues and conflicts may be healthy for any organization since they serve both positive and negative purposes but crisis, on the other hand, is definitely not. Corroborating this, Ochogwu (2010.p.10) states, "conflict is part of the existensial realities of human coexistence, but conflict does set society in development reverse, promotes poverty, anarchy and acrimonies between groups and communities". Nevertheless, both crisis and conflicts are inevitable in any human endeavour. Citing Marshal (1994), Dzurgba (2010) noted that conflict theorists are of the view that disorder and instability in particular and conflict in general should be seen as normal aspects of social life as they are required for social change, transformation and development. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1995) defines crisis as a period or moment of great danger, difficulty, or uncertainty, especially in politics or economics. This implies that crisis poses danger to human, group or corporate survival although some crises may lead to positive outcome. Some of the sources of conflict, as listed by Dzurgba (2010) include religion, power, politics, economic interest, leadership, human nature, environmental disorder, racial prejudices, and ideological differences. Thus crisis is the resultant effect of unresolved issues.

Decisions taken at both formal and informal levels often generate issues in any human organization. At the local government level, decisions taken by council authorities do generate issues among the various publics of the council and such may lead to crisis if not properly resolved. Often times, information officers are not carried along in the decision making process at the local government level in Nigeria. Sometimes, other staff like administrative officers and personal aides of the councils' Chief Executive (Chairman) have played the role of information officers in media relations albeit unprofessionally. However, the fact remains that whenever there is crisis or even at the level of conflict, information officers are remembered and are put to task to either carry out some functions or asked to explain what steps they have taken or left out in conflicts resolution as it affects the council's various publics. It is on this note that this paper examines the roles of information officers in crisis management at the council level.

Information Officers as Public Relations Managers in Local Governments

To begin with, Information Officers at the local government level must see themselves as Public Relations Managers of their various councils. They must distinguish themselves from all other categories of staff. Their functions differ greatly and they must be qualified professionals in public relations job, otherwise, the task of crisis management will become insurmountable.

Information Officers are the Public Relations Officers/Managers of their respective local governments because they deal with the various publics of the council. Their main task is to relate the local government to its various publics through information generation and dissemination as it affects the grassroots dwellers.

Local Government Publics

The first assignment of any Information Officer who wants to succeed is to identify the various publics of his/her council. The publics in public relations are the target publics who are determined by the issues at hand. Igben (1997) defines publics as those whose interest are affected in the process of achieving set PR objectives. They are those whose opinions are of concern to the functioning of the organization. Consequently, local government publics refer to groups of people who are interested in, or are affected by the activities of the local government. Generally, organization's publics are classified into two, internal and external. At the local government level the list of internal and external publics which are by no means exhaustive as presented in this paper include:

Internal Publics

The internal publics of local governments in Nigeria include:

- The executive (elected or appointed) officials, the management, members of staff, staff union- NULGE, various departments, the ruling political party and In-house service providers i.e. food vendor, GSM operators etc.

External Publics

The external publics comprise the following:

- contractors, various communities, community/opinion leaders, religious leaders, traditional rulers, students, political parties (i.e. opposition), youth organizations, market women, small scale entrepreneurs, social groups/associations and courts-customary, high, palace courts

Crisis Management

Levels/Stages in Crisis

As earlier stated, crisis don't just happen, they are a product of unresolved conflicts which in turn are a product of unresolved issues.

Issues - Conflicts - Crises

If issues are well managed, conflicts will be prevented and by extension crisis. We shall therefore briefly take a look at how to manage each of the concepts above.

Issues Management

According to Folarin (2001.p.3), issues refer to "a topic or subject matter that is of interest to some or all of the publics of an organization or an institution such as a government; a matter or event that has potential consequence(s) for a public or the publics of an organization or institution, or a topic around which public opinion has crystallized into identifiable characteristics or configuration". Thus, an issue as it affects local government could be anything like wages, bursary/scholarships, projects execution, or even events like rallies whether political or religious; and courtesy visit. Issues, as simple and harmless they sometimes seem, may snowball into conflicts if not properly managed. Management in this context, according to Dzuegba (2010), refers to an act or a skill of planning, organising, coordinating and controlling the administration of a peace process. Jones and Chase as cited in Folarin (2001) have identified four stages in issues management.

1. **Issues identification:** Finding out the interests, concerns and topics that may generate conflicts later or are generating some now with a view to nipping them in the bud. This is the stage of environmental scanning trouble – shooting.
2. **Issues Analysis/Clarification:** This is the stage at which the issues that have been identified are scrutinized and pondered upon to ensure sound inferences and action plan.
3. **Issues Change Strategy Option:** At this stage, alternative plans of actions are suggested and are weighed and screened to pick the best option.
4. **Issues Action Programmes:** This is the stage at which the selected option plan or plans is/are finally translated into action.

Conflict Management

If issues are well managed, conflict would be prevented. However, conflict itself is inevitable in an organization for it has its benefits as well as its consequences on an organization. According to Folarin (2001), conflict is the child of issue and father of crisis. Hocker and Wilmot, cited in Owens – Ibie (2000), define conflict as an expressed struggle between at least two independent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals.

This definition suggests that conflict is a product of relationship or interaction between and among parties. In other words, conflicts are inevitable in any given relationship where interaction takes place and is likely not to exist where there is no relationship or interaction. Owens – Ibie listed the following as types of conflicts:

1. Manifest conflict – clear and overt indicators and expressions of grievances.
2. Latent conflict – under - the - current and subtle evidence of conflict intervention
3. Intra-Personal conflict- conflict within an individual.
4. Inter-Personal conflict – conflict between individuals
5. Intra-Unit/Section/Department conflict
6. Industrial and Labour Conflict
7. Inter- organizational conflict
8. Community- Related Conflict

Owens-Ibie (2000) listed the causes of conflict to include

1. Incompatible goals
2. Unrealistic expectation
3. Differing rates of relational growth
4. Inaccurate perceptions and attributions
5. Cultural differences
6. Management style
7. Work overload
8. Communication breakdown
8. Organisational politics

In his own words, Arije (2005.pp.135-144) listed the forms and manifestations of conflicts in organization to include:

- Class struggle, ethnicity/tribalism, inadequate reward for contribution, selfish inclination and favoritism, indiscipline and economic considerations and communication gap

Management of conflict requires a strategy in order to achieve set-goals through effective actions and strategy itself means a well-planned series of actions aimed at achieving specific results (Dzurgba, 2010). The principles of issues management also are applied to conflict management albeit with modifications. We shall briefly discuss conflict management or conflict resolution under four headings as suggested by Owens-Ibie (2000): collaboration, negotiation, mediation and arbitration.

1. **Collaboration:** Bringing together the parties involved in a constructive dialogue. Here the interests of all are tabled and attempts are made to satisfy them equitably.
2. **Negotiation:** This is a bargaining process making each party to press for the absolute satisfaction of its interest. This method, which is the most common in conflict resolution, involves power play where each party strives to satisfy its interest and not concede any without a strong argument. Each party argues in its favour and down plays opposing arguments.
3. **Mediation:** Under this method, the warring parties allow a third-party to facilitate reconciliation and peace. The mediators can only succeed in most cases in leaving the parties in conflicts with the following options: ignoring the conflict, allowing it to escalate, negotiation, arbitration or going to court.
4. **Arbitration:** Considered to be the last resort, arbitration involves parties in conflict agreeing to submit their arguments and positions to a neutral party, who is empowered to act like a judge, pronounce judgment which the parties are bound to abide by.

Apart from arbitration (i.e industrial arbitration panel) another option in conflict resolution which is often discouraged is litigation (going to court) because of its cost in terms of financial and time resources.

Crisis Management

As stated earlier, crisis is better prevented than managed. To prevent crisis, conflicts must be well managed and resolved for unresolved conflicts breed crisis. Similarly, to prevent conflict, issues must be well handled. However, no matter how hard we try, we cannot prevent some issues from degenerating into conflicts and later on to crisis. When such occur, we have to manage. Information management is the key to conflict and crisis management.

Prevention, they say, is better than cure; thus, the best way to ensure a peaceful atmosphere in any organization is by preventing crisis through trouble shooting prompt resolution of issues. This is known as proactive public relations. However, some situations can still degenerate into crisis no matter how much one tries. In such situations, appropriate steps should be taken to mitigate such crises through the deployment of appropriate public relations strategies. This is called reactive public relations. At the local government level, issues like land dispute, traditional festivals, students demand for bursaries and events like rallies can snowball into crisis if not properly handled. While some crisis may directly emanate or has to do with the local government council i.e. workers strike and violent protest against certain government policies, others may have less bearing with the council but the resultant effect affects the local government administration. At crisis situation, the competence of the PR practitioner (Information Officer in this case) is called to question even though he may not have directly or indirectly contributed to the crisis. This is because most of the conflicts are caused by communication gap or communication breakdown among parties.

As Ajala (1993,p.94) puts it: "The organization of a crisis management plan is often the role left to the PR specialist. That means that communication takes priority". As a result, information officers must play a key role in crisis management at the council level.

The Role of Information Officers in Crisis Management

The role of an information officer in crisis management is basically that of information management or effective communication. What he does with information at his disposal will determine the level of his success or otherwise at the critical moment.

This role shall be discussed under the three main headings below. Bridge

Formulating/Deciding Crisis Communication Approach(es)

Folarin (2001) has suggested flexible and fronted communication approaches. By flexibility, we mean varying the style, method and approaches to communication during crisis situation. Folarin said it would certainly be presumptuous for anyone to try to prescribe a foolproof strategy for crisis communication. The same expert therefore suggested what he called front end communication approach (FEC), which involves reaching out to or discussing with your crucial publics before others do, especially before your detractors and before the press and the rumour mill take over. If not, you will be in the defensive corner of C&D –either confirming or denying.

Designing Messages for Crisis

During crisis, the Information Officer is, on behalf of the council, communication both with the internal and external publics. As such, he must design appropriate messages for internal and external audiences. To the internal publics, he must keep them constantly informed about goings-on concerning the crisis in clear, polite, firm and unambiguous manner. He must advise his principal (management) to avoid issuing threatening notices as common in government practice as these have long been proved to be counter-productive.

To the external publics, the public relations man must be factual and truthful in his utterances. He must avoid overt or covert lies or begging the issue or dodging it. Speaking half-truth to the press will not help for it can lead to embarrassment when journalists finally discover the truth through investigative reporting. For example, *Nigerian Tribune* (2008) reported a case of a lecturer from The Polytechnic, Ibadan, allegedly caught with a prostitute in his office during official hours. An argument ensued between the duo which drew public attention and the security unit had to come in and seize their undies. Both the Head of Department of the lecturer and the institution's Public Relations Officer denied the presence of a prostitute in the lecturer's office even when the reporter quoted some evidences. The officials merely admitted that there was a misunderstanding between the lecturer and a visitor (not a prostitute). Alas, the following week, the paper carried a follow-up story of the sack of the lecturer. What a confirmation!

Selecting the Media for Crisis Communication

Various media are available for communication crisis situation. They can be grouped into controlled and uncontrolled media. Controlled media according to Ajala (1993,p.51) are those in which the practitioner determines to a large extent, what is said, how it is said, when it is said and to some extent, to whom it is said. The uncontrolled media are those in which the practitioner cannot determine the aspect specified above under controlled media at the point of origin. Both can be used for internal and external communication but the former favour internal communication which the latter is more at home with external communication.

Details of these media are preened in Tables one and two below:

Table One: Controlled Media

The Printed Word

Organisational publication

- Newsletters
- Pamphlets for new employees orientation
- Books e.g. History of organization
- Letters
- Bulletin boards and Posters
- Printed speeches
- Fax messages

The Spoken Word

The grapevine rumours and corporate gossips

- Meetings
- Speeches
- Seminars
- Closed circuit television
- Radio messages

The Image

Films and slide Presentations for new employees Displays and exhibits

Table Two: Uncontrolled Media

The printed word

- Daily and weekly Newspapers (press releases)
- Tabloids
- Magazines
- Business and Professional Publications
- Public relations Advertising e.g. Identity advertising

The Spoken Word

- Radio announcements (press releases)
- Television news following news releases
- Cable television
- video tapes on company activities
- Annual General Meetings

The Image

- Corporate social responsibility programmes e.g. donations
- Pollution control
- Sponsorship of sporting events
- Public information centres

Source: Ajala, V. O (1993) *Public Relations: In Search of Professional Excellence*. Ibadan: Africa - Link Books pp.51-52

Conclusion

Local government information officers are the information managers of their respective councils. Issues and conflicts abound in every human endeavour including the local government administration and when not promptly and properly resolved snowballs into crisis. Thus, local government information officers should be pro-active in preventing crisis rather than managing it. Thus, they should work with and on the various publics (both internal and external) of their councils to resolve issues through effective communication and information management. However, when unresolved issues lead to conflicts and inevitable crisis, their skills of public relations in crisis management would be ultimately required. This includes a proper research into the issues involved and mapping out PR strategies on how to resolve them. A SWOT analysis of identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to the local government council during conflict and crisis may be apt for the information officers. However, it must be pointed out that information officers must be part of the decision making process in information generation and dissemination, and media relations in order to exhibit their skills of relationship building and goodwill.

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