



PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT AT THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL

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Abstract

The Local Government as the third tier of government occupies a vital position in the political arrangement of Nigeria. In as much as many factors stand out to spur the local government to greater performance, one that is outstanding is public relations. Public relations secure public attention through competence in communication. The study adopted content analysis methodology. As a corollary to local government success is the integration of multidimensional factors. Thus the paper examined essential issues like factors that contribute to the formation of opinion, corporate social responsibility, public opinion and attitudinal change. The position of the paper is that the local government should welcome opinions of the people which include constructive criticism with a view to bringing change for greater performance.

Keywords: Local government, public relations, public opinion, corporate social responsibility.

Introduction

The Local Government as third tier of Government is primarily established to serve the people at the grassroots (Chukwuemeka, 2013). It is the Government closest to the people. Thus the local government should see the people they serve as partners in progress. How can this be achieved? It is to be achieved through effective public relations management (Eze, 2014). It is pertinent to also ask; can the Local government achieve the set objectives without finance? No is the answer. Therefore the local government has to mount effective revenue mobilization strategy which would be followed by effective public relations. People are not happy when they are expected to pay tax or rate, especially when the government is not able to provide the necessary amenities for the people. The people also ought to know the activities of the local government, which include mass mobilization and sensitization of the people so that they could appreciate the position of the local government at all times.

What Public Relations Can Do and Cannot Do

What public relations can do is to influence the attitudes and actions of the management which uses it. It can help articulate views as well as secure public attention through competence in communications. Public relations can counter the arguments of those with opposing viewpoints, especially those who perceive the local government as drain pipes. By furnishing information and viewpoints, public relations can encourage an uncommitted segment of the public to take a favourable position on specific issues. Once an unfortunate situation is corrected, public relations can help rebuild an organization's reputation and corporate image by communicating the changes that have been made (Uba, 2013).

In addition to expediting communications, it helps make management aware of public opinions and responsive to it by measuring, evaluating and interpreting the attitudes of various relevant publics. Public relations assist management in defining objectives for increasing public understanding and acceptance of the organization's products, plans, policies and personnel. It equates these objectives with the interests, needs, and goals of the various relevant publics and develops, executes and evaluates a programme to earn public understanding and acceptance. It tries hard to do the right thing at the right time and make certain that what is done is both sincere and understood. What public relations can do in the organization is enormous. However, it should be noted that public relations is not a cure-all for all of the problems that beset public or business organisations. It is only one of the activities that contribute to the solution of certain problems. Its efforts can be nullified by misdeeds, by poor services or by bad policies.

Ways of Improving the Public Relations and Image of the local government

Employment Of Competent Media Specialist

Graduates of journalism, public relations and or mass communication should be ideal to handle the public relations responsibility in the public organization. Such experts have contributed greatly in the past to the success of the programmes of many public agencies. Department heads and other top officials usually do not have the time to write their own speeches, so everybody in government desires talented members of the information staff to prepare drafts for them. Information experts also give advice to policy-makers on probable public reactions to proposed policies and on how to present new policies to the public with maximum effectiveness

Effective use of press outlets:

In developing the organization's public relations programme, a good public relations manager should make effective use of the press and other outlets. But press relations must be managed well in order to avoid publicity problems

Development of Good Employee Morale

A government organization should understand the relationship between the moral of all its employees and effective public relations. Dissatisfied employees are by no means an internal problem only. They live in the local community; their neighbours identify them with their organizations. If they are little interested in their work or, with apparent justification, are even critical of their superiors, these neighbours and friends will form an unfavourable impression of such government organizations.

Developing Employees' Communication Skills

Although employees should be trained generally in public relations, a particular need is to develop their communication skills. Employees should be able to write intelligible letters in response to inquiries from the public. Also the public organization should have at least a few officials who are good speakers and who can explain its programmes to local groups.

Other Public Communication Training Needs

Some employees of the local government should be made to have short-term training programmes in human relations, public speaking, conference leadership, oral communication, and so on

Community Relations Programmes

The positive approach emphasizes the need for community relations programmes designed to gain acceptance of the local government in the community. Government policies and activities should be continuously scrutinized to eliminate offending features, wherever possible. The numerous devices for maintaining good relations with the public include:

- (a) Establishing contact with local leaders of thought such as prominent business men, heads of community organizations, and town union executives.

- (b) Exchanging speakers with local group, especially important social clubs, and similar community organizations to educate them on the programmes of the local government and why the local governments require finance to carry out their programmes.
- (c) Participating in community campaigns.
- (d) Arrange conferences or seminars to explain the programme of the local government

In view of the enormous merits of public relations, the local government, systems and other government agencies should as a matter of importance mount public relations unit with professional personnel to man it. The professionals should in turn give orientation to revenue workers on the best way to relate with the public and generate sufficient funds. Thus, the local government reputation for performance, for integrity, for financial strength or for progressive research becomes a backdrop against which the organization business is done. Today, it is considered as much as a business handicap to have no reputation as to have a bad one. People prefer to do business with those they like (Agieyi, 2017).

Image of the Local Government – An Overview

Recent development in the political administration of Nigeria and numerous research findings have proved conclusively that the local government especially the revenue collectors are wicked and heartless people., This position stems from the overwhelming evidence obtained in the following areas:

- Embezzlement and misappropriation of fund
- Inability to execute people-oriented projects
- Bribery and corruption by employees
- Employment of thugs as revenue agents
- Misappropriation of derivation fund in oil producing states.
- Excessive levies and fees
- Insensitivity to the presence of touts in parks
- Despotic tendencies of political office holders
- Lack of political direction and philosophy
- Non payment of contractors
- Nepotism in employment policies and project execution
- Fiscal indiscipline among management etc

External Public

The external public of the local government include the community at large, contractors, banks, insurance companies, business organization, rateable adults, market users etc. To improve image in this area, there has to be a paradigm shift from colonial mentality which sees the people as crude, naïve and stubborn to a modern mentality which recognized and respects the feelings of the citizenry. Consequently, effective image laundering could be achieved through the following ways.

- Leadership by example
- Revenue generation that is devoid of intimidation and bribery
- Adoption of transparent employment policy that is devoid of tribalism and nepotism
- Efforts should be geared towards the achievement of even development among the people.
- Workers should strive to promote interdepartmental cohesion
- Revenue workers should be transparent and honest
- The use of thugs and touts in revenue generation should be discouraged.
- Provision of adequate training programmes for revenue workers

Based on the above account of corrupt practices in the local government, there is need to rescue its battered image through effective public relation practices. Having identified the factors, which tarnish the public image of the local government, it is believed that concerted efforts made by the local government to improve on these factors will go a long way in improving public image. This image building will concern both the internal public “and the external public”.

The Internal Public

The employees of the local government constitute the internal public. There is the need to improve the corporate image in the eyes of the employees. The management should strive to build trust among the workers. Inconsistency between what is said and what is done undermines trust, generates employee cynicism, and provides evidence of contradictions in management thinking. To this end, the Institute of Personnel Development (IPD) suggests that building of trust is the only basis on which commitment can be guaranteed. Consequently, they concluded that attaining or sustaining world class levels of performance will be unlikely in organization which do not trust their employees in way consistent with their status.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a relatively new concept in the business world. It was introduced in the 1980s. Ajala in Okafor (2006). Some people believe in the concept, others do not. For that reason, it has been differently defined along the two lines of those who believe and those who do not believe in the concept. For those who do not believe in the concept, it is largely seen as loss of accountability to shareholders. Those opponents of corporate social responsibility argue that if corporations assume so much responsibility over the community they may create tension within the organization and society Ajala, (1999). Chukwuemeka (2009) argues that the corporate executive who carries out social responsible activities retains income to shareholders by spending their money. His actions may also raise the price of goods or services, thereby spending the customers' money. He may also be spending some employees' wages as long as his actions bring about reduction in their wages. In summary, corporate social responsibility is a social investment and an opportunity to portray goodwill in a community.

Objectives of Corporate Social Responsibility

- (1) To build on the image of the organization, gain the public trust, sympathy, support and goodwill for its operations. These are the basis of a successful organization.
- (2) To safeguard the environment from which an organization derives its resources and on which it depends for support for its corporate existence.
- (3) To help maintain and develop further resources for future sustenance
In the course of an organisation's activities, it may exploit the natural resources, utilize energy, and cause degradation. It is not proper for such an organization to feel unconcerned about those who will depend on the same factors for sustenance in the future. It is therefore an obligation for the organization to do something to maintain and develop further resources for the sustenance of the people in the area.
- (4) To analyse issues of the moment which will affect the organization and take position without jeopardizing its future on issues of national, environmental and cultural importance, including power sharing, ownership, control, centralization or decentralization, discipline, minority development and so on.
To sum up this discourse, we recommend that Corporate Social Responsibility should be practiced in the local government as a way of image laundering.

Public Relations, Public Opinion and Attitude Change

Public relations, public opinion and attitude are among the important factors which the local government must take into account in order to survive and prosper in the modern aggressive world. Public relations, public opinion and attitude change work interchangeably in organizations. Public relations employ public opinion as a tool to carry out its functions. There is perhaps no better means of cultivating and sustaining public understanding, good will and support than a careful and serious attention to public relations to public opinion and to the behaviour or attitudes of the publics. The extent to which the local government use these tools of public relation, public opinion and attitudes can make the difference between success and failure.

Categories of publics

- (1) The mass public – don't have opportunity to express their opinion in a meaningful way the opinions which they hold, they constitute mostly the non elites, peasants etc.

- (2) The attentive public – always listen to what the mass media . They follow trends of events and issues and discuss intelligently, they are opinion leaders in their communities.
- (3) The Opinion making public – constitutes a very small minority of the people, sometimes less than 2% of the population. The group is made up of people who form, hold and express opinions on most issues of public interest in view of the positions they hold, their wealth, their educational attainments or their social standing. E.g The Chairman of the Local Government Service Commission, Members of the Commission etc.

Factors that contribute to the formation of an opinion

- (a) Cultural socialization
- (b) Political socialization
- © Religious orientation
- (d) Level of knowledge
- (e) Sex
- (f) Peers and peer group's influence
- (g) Personality status
- (h) Situational contingencies
- (i) The family influence

Public Opinion and attitude change – Lessons for the Local Government

The local government as the third tier of government is more vulnerable to aggression than the central and state governments. The simple reason is the fact that the local government is closest to the masses – peasant masses, elite masses, illiterate masses etc. Therefore the local government should try to appreciate and articulate all opinions made by the people to reposition itself to perform better. The local government should even build opinion boxes and place in strategic places across the communities to enable it know what the people say . Any government that welcomes opinions of the people is likely to perform well because such government would know her areas of weaknesses and strengths. Conversely, the local government should see the people it serves as those who are downtrodden and require help especially in the provision of social infrastructures, social amenities etc. Some days could be set aside for the local government to interact with the people so that both will know their areas of differences. It is therefore my candid opinion that with effective public relations in place, the local government will achieve great feat in bettering the lives of the people it serves.

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