



## PUBLIC RELATIONS AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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**Abstract:** The act of using effective communication to establish, maintain, and protect an organization's reputation among both internal and external publics is known as public relations. Surprisingly, when a company's public image achieves a high standard based on the characteristics above, it translates into the enhanced public trust, patronage, goodwill, higher profit growth, and an environment that is calm and stable. The academic scholar heightened involvement in this topic because of the initial premise: they wanted to learn more about public relations as an instrument for conflict resolution and see how effective public relations initiatives are in settling conflicts. On a practical level, this inquiry could assist the organization in maintaining good public relations tactics. In conclusion, the administration should guarantee that the public relations personnel have constantly trained and retrained to maintain current public relations knowledge and abilities. It will ensure that they stay up to date on the latest developments in public relations.

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**Keywords:** Conflict Resolution, Public Relations

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### Introduction

Public relations were not usually a permanent position till after the first world conflict in 1914-1918. During that period, restrictions for publicity and commercial notes for public relations (Thompson, 2003). A change in traditional practices came when private industrial establishments used public relations to improve workers' attitudes. It also enhances cooperation and competitive policy formulation to achieve the organization's goals. Public relations as a management function is recognized. The emergence led to further improvement on tools like public opinion, publicity, advertising propaganda, press release, and conference (Kotler and Armstrong, 2006). In modern life, public relation is significant, especially in business industries, military, civil service, and government, because the world is industrialized. It is achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding based on truth and complete information. Public relations is a topic of debate and controversy as an event; both are societal, with individuals as the center of

attention. In the absence of humans, there is no such thing as a dispute in any institution (Ibrahim, 2001). According to David (1983), public relations study fundamental ideologies, ideas, attitudes, theories, and attitudes that regulate social behaviors. Assume that human beings cause conflicts in the organizations in which they live. In that case, they will almost always require some form of balance in a conflict situation to mitigate the inopportune impacts of conflict (Edafejirhaye and Alao, 2019). The public relations practitioner uses effective communications to maintain and protect his organization's reputation among its internal and external publics. Furthermore, public relations has remained an effective instrument for fostering and maintaining mutual understanding among the organization's diverse stakeholders. It also aids in generating a particular concept and preparing the requested information by consumers in the interest of an organization.

According to empirical studies, effective public relations helps to lessen conflict between an organization and the

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general public (Grunig et al., 1998). For example, public relations can aid in resolving disputes and reducing competitive costs as a result of regulation and pressure (Huang, 2001). Researchers have looked into effective conflict resolution tactics (Gallicano, 2013). Nonetheless, their generality has converged on the importance of public relations in conflict settlement. They haven't discussed the duties and responsibilities of public relations practitioners in dispute resolution. Huang and Su (2009), for example, examined how public relations methods are related to dispute resolution. Qiu and Cameron (2007) looked at how strategic conflict management can use a public relations technique in health communication.

In every organization, there exist conflicts. According to a survey, 85% of employees at all levels in Europe, the United States, and Brazil face competition to some degree. In the United States, employees spend 2.8 hours per week dealing with conflict (CPP, 2008). For two reasons, companies today have even more significant difficulties in resolving disagreements. First, new communication technologies can sabotage efforts to convey conflict resolution solutions (DiNardo, 2002). For example, by offering a venue for collective actions, social media might encourage the threat of conflict. Managing collective behaviours can be more complicated than driving individual habits (Moule et al., 2017). Second, a company viewed a dispute between organizations and their constituents as positive and negative consequences. Experts indicated that a company must effectively promote business elements by leveraging public relations efforts to give stakeholders, employees, and the general public the most up-to-date information (Penning, 2007).

Any commercial organization or institution will face conflict at some point. It has the prospective to be both serious and beneficial to businesses. It all relies on whether or not the company can use a conflict scenario to its benefit. If not prevented, it has the potential to destroy an organization. According to academics, integration, obliging, maintaining, avoiding, and partnering are some of the ways disputes are managed (Laderach, 1995). For

centuries, public relations has been an effective and dependable instrument for managing and resolving business conflicts and crises. Public relations must utilize its concepts and strategies to address and resolve global arenas and diplomatic circles. This paper aims to contribute to the advancement of public relations theory by describing the causal links between these two constructs. In addition, this essay will discuss how public relations contribute to organizational effectiveness and how relationship traits influence the impact of public relations on dispute resolution.

#### **Roles and Functions of Public Relations Practitioners**

As researchers have expanded the manager/technician typology, public relations has emerged in the literature. Broom and Smith (1978) introduced the roles in public relations. The five positions they proposed were the expert prescriber, the technical services supplier, the communication process facilitator, the problem solving/task facilitator, and the acceptant-legitimizer. They later removed the job of acceptant-legitimizer, leaving only four functions. They discovered a strong link between three roles: expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and facilitator of the problem-solving process (Dozier, 2005). According to Dozier (1984), the two most important jobs in public relations research are manager and technician.

The manager and technician typologies have come under growing fire. Other researchers have looked into the role of public relations in organizations. Scholars recognized many new public relations positions and responsibilities across countries in the late 1990s. For example, in the United States, Wright (1995) described communication executives, whereas, in the Netherlands, Van Riel (1995) stressed the communications role's window and mirror duties. In Denmark, Holmstrom (1996) identified the contemplative and expressive functions.

Meanwhile, Toth et al. (1998) discovered a third role, dubbed "agency profile." Hutton (1999) characterized responsibilities as an advocate, persuader, educator, information supplier, crusader, and reputation



management at the same time. In a Delphi survey carried in 25 European nations, the European Public Relations Body of Knowledge (EBOK) identified four critical public relations purposes: operational, managerial, instructional, and reflective. Steyn and Butschi (2003) investigated the African continent and found similarities between multiple task conceptualizations. They emphasized that the crucial and reproducing roles are comparable, even they found out on diverse techniques and theories; both work as demonstrates. In addition, European Public Relations discovered three of the four EBOK jobs (managerial, reflective, and operational) related to the manager, technician, and strategist representations in South Africa (Steyn, 2011).

Social media is becoming public relations practice as it increases popularity and transfigures how we cooperate, interact, create, and consume (Aral et al., 2013). This information technology allows public relations practitioners to interact with several stakeholders more conveniently, faster, and efficiently (DiStaso et al., 2011). Steyn (1999) divided corporate-organized communication supervisors into three categories based on these advancements: manager, technician, and strategist. Next, Steyn (2011) defined public relations strategists' tasks as identifying and maintaining society's subjects and preparing communication systems to avoid conflict.

Steyn and Green (2006) proposed a novel theoretical framework for contemplative and educational functions. They renamed the strategist function as a reflecting or strategist role and envisioned it at the strategic management level. As a result, Steyn's (2009) strategist function expanded by including the meditative dimension. According to the findings of numerous European studies (e.g., Vercic et al., 2001; Van Ruler et al., 2001). As a result, the public relations literature has theorized four positions (strategist, manager, academic, and technician) (Steyn, 2009). This analysis relies on this understanding of the four phases in the context of this historical development. To prevent and resolve disputes, Steyn (2009) claimed that practitioners must function as an early

warning system, create interaction between a business and its customers and call the management's attention to the communities' viewpoints. In this approach, handling conflicts is a critical responsibility of public relations practitioners.

### **Conflict Resolutions in Public Relations**

Earlier, the science of public relations relied on conflict as a theoretical foundation for problem-solving. In the realm of public relations, there have been various research on dispute resolution. For instance, Gossen and Sharp (1987) considered public relations to deliver service to achieve a mutually beneficial outcome. Ehling (1984) and Lauzen (1986) investigated the direct connection between dispute resolution and public relations. Murphy (1991) advocated a mixed-motive paradigm for managing conflict in which the public and organizations should work together. According to Plowman (1998), conflict resolution can enable public relations practitioners to join a group's majority alliance.

Furthermore, Anderson (1992) and Grunig (1992) proposed that an asymmetrical public relations model might reduce conflict between an enterprise and its constituents. Other academic researchers (Edafejirhaye & Alao, 2019; Cho & Cameron, 2006; Gallicano, 2013; Huang, 2001; Shin, 2008; Shin & Cameron, 2004; Plowman et al., 2004) have examined diverse perspectives of public relations and conflict (Edafejirhaye & Alao, 2019; Cho & Cameron, 2006; Gallicano, 2013; Huang, 2001; Shin, 2008; Shin & Cameron, 2004; Plowman et al., 2004). These investigations observed many kinds of negotiation tactics. In filling a vacuum in the literature, this study will investigate the functions and roles of public relations practitioners in settling conflicts in several nations.



### **Public Relations and Conflict Theories**

A study of public relations and conflict necessitates the examination of public relations strategy and appropriate conflict theories. In their broadest sense, theories are a collection of interconnected generalizations integrated to build a formal process of interpretation in which no paradigm undermines others (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1982). It's a collection of related statements that give a systematic perspective of a situation by defining links between concepts (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). A good theory should illustrate how a particular figure should act the way it does. It contends that a good theory describes a specific event or activity (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). It helps to make sense of a chaotic situation. It creates order from chaos. As a result, a good theory must elucidate perplexing situations. It must, by necessity, expose an event or situation that seems hazy to the point where a solid, accurate, and detailed comprehension of the situation can be guaranteed (Nwosu, 1995).

The *psychodynamic model* is a public relations paradigm based on psychological principles. In 1900, Sigmund Freud proposed it. The model is related to theory based on the following assumptions: (1) it examines mental processes; (2) it is concerned with motives related to personality psychology; (3) it focuses on underlying motivations and how an approach can address negative by breaking harmful habits (Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto, 2009). According to De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1982), the theories are based on individual differences, theorizing that for clear signals to be impactful, they must succeed in modifying the desired people's mental and emotional direction. They will retaliate publicly to the communicator's expected and planned theoretical framework. As Mogu (2009) points out, in Nigerian churches, strife has become a frequent occurrence, leading to killings, property destruction, kidnappings of pastors, aggravating pastors through transfer, and in some cases, deploying hired assassins to threaten church leaders.

Public relations specialists can use persuasion to discover the sources of conflict in firms and create effective messaging for specific employees and leaders. As desired by public relations professionals, leaders' psychological orientations will transform as a result.

*Transfer Process Model.* Frank Jefkins offered the public relations transfer process model in 1988. The theory's central tenet is that unpleasant situations can be transformed into positive outcomes via effective communication, resulting in mutual understanding. It demonstrates how communication experts can use and apply public relations tools and techniques to set organizations' hostile conditions. In addition, the administration has shifted its perspective from sympathy to hospitality, acceptance to prejudice, curiosity to apathy, and ignorance to knowledge (Jefkins, 1992; Nkwocha, 1999). According to Oji (2009), the transfer process model is an antidote to organizational conflict since it targets all adverse characteristics such as prejudice, antagonism, ignorance, and apathy.

*Eclectic (hybrid) Theories.* These are a collection of conflict theories derived from psychology that lead to the occurrence and resolution of conflict. Eclectic approaches begin with the premise that both underlying and situational variables determine the conduct and that these aspects cannot be divided (Akanji, 2011). According to Cunningham (1998), eclectic theories argue that insurgencies are a combination of different variables. Political, social, economic, historical, spiritual, cultural, and psychological factors can all contribute to a conflict because conflicts are so complicated, communication experts like Skinner (1974); Yusuf (2012). Kurt Lewin's "Field Theory," according to Tidwell, falls into this category because it aims to combine individual behaviour and social context in conflict. According to Lewin, both individuals and communities are interconnected and accountable for any occurrences. As a result, human



behaviour confounds in explaining variance between intrinsic and human behaviour.

Eclectic perspectives, according to an academic scientist, identify two primary reasons for conflict in every dispute. On the one hand, “contingent” motives produce disagreement. These are societal inequalities that are deeply ingrained. However, rarely sufficient to initiate conflict within their own. They are, on the other hand, conflict “triggers,” which are the fundamental (immediate) reasons for failure (Akanji, 2011). Cunningham (1998) also backs up the idea that eclectic theories can better understand variation. He referred to them as a synthesis of micro and macro theories. Micro theories are psychosocial theories that place disagreement in the underlying system of an entity. He referred to the classical theories, which put the conflict in cross-functional relations when mentioned macro theories. He looked to understand Northern Ireland’s turmoil by combining micro and macro theories into “hybrid” hypotheses (Akanji, 2011). However, even these eclectic ideas have been questioned, partly because they do not avoid frustration to a single cause.

### **Public Relations Strategies for Conflict Management**

Public relations contributes to mutual understanding across groups and organizations, which helps our complex, multicultural society gain a competitive edge and execute more successfully. Its purpose is to bring public and private policies into an agreement. It supports diverse organizations such as trade unions, businesses, government agencies, marital institutions, foundations, educational and religious institutions, and hospitals. For example, in line with the priorities, these organizations cultivate strong relationships with diverse audiences or the public, including leaders, employees, customers, members, shareholders, and local communities (Igben, 1997; Igben, 2009). The author discussed several public relations tactics employed in conflict resolution around the world.

Dialogue, negotiation, mediation, community relations, arbitration, and many others are among them (Yusuf, 2012; Aworinde, 1993; and Awojobi, 2011). Public relations has managed to stay a valuable tool in conflict resolution.

Anaeto and Solo-Anaeto (2009) identify four public relations strategies in the management of conflict. They are (1) Collaboration: This involves using constructive dialogue by both parties involved in a conflict to find an explanation to the problem. The welfares of both parties are defined, and there is a determination to satisfy all the claims to ensure an amicable relationship equitably. 2) Negotiation: This strategy involves a bargaining process. Every party in the conflict investigates the absolute satisfaction of its interest and conceding to any other option. There is much power play in this strategy since no party requires to dissipate in the method. In handling this conflict, a middle point is agreed upon and accepted by both parties. The eventual agreement entered by both parties serves as the document that governs cooperation and their relationship. 3) Mediation: This is a tactic in which a nonpartisan third party proceeds to better resolve the conflict between the two parties. The third party is the negotiator; he promotes reconciliation and peace between the parties. He must be a confidential and respectable entity among the disputants to succeed in the task. 4) Arbitration: In this strategy, both parties present their disputes and opinions to a neutral party empowered to judge. Whatever judgment pronounces, the parties bounded by regulation to take it. By this strategy, one party wins while the other loses. Hence the above three theories justify using more than one theory to explain conflict situations in a church setting because of a different approach to conflict management.

### **Cultural Aspects of Conflict Management Strategies**

Blake and Mouton (1964) suggested the managerial grid model in the conflict management literature that emphasizes two dimensions (i.e., concern for production



and situation for people) in managers' conflict management styles. The degree of these dimensions affects managers' conflict management style. For example, suppose the degree of concern is low for production and high for people. In that position, the supervisor will most likely opt for a compromise strategy. Other two-dimensional models that prognosticate conflict management styles are based on this model. Such as Pruitt and Rubin's (1987) dual-concern model and Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (Ni et al., 2018).

Two-dimensional models are also influential in communication studies, where academic researchers have examined and criticized them. For instance, Cai and Fink (2002) exerted the models' conflict management styles. They found that multiple dimensions describe managers' conflict management styles better than two dimensions. Wang and colleagues (2012) tested the relationships between the dual-concern model's goals and conflict management styles. They generated a typology of aims and conflict avoidance approaches. Ni et al. (2018) introduced a new public relations conflict management model by integrating diverse theories in intercultural perspectives. They concentrated on two components: organization and public. They showed that numerous organizations could adequately practice intercultural public relations by employing different environmental scanning strategies, relationship management, and identifying publics. In addition, organizations must absorb substantial internal alignment and differences in policies, procedures, and behaviours. They influence and concentrate on their public in conflict management strategies. It also noted that individuals' cultural identity, personal life experiences, societal cultures, cultural dimensions and organizational factors such as how organizations manage conflicts with their public could affect public perceptions and behaviours. Thus, culture is a substantial factor in resolving conflict management styles in disagreement conditions.

In cross-cultural studies, cultures are classified into two categories: collectivism and individualist. Conflict management research in communication studies has revealed that these two groups have different conflict management strategies. Individualists, for example, prefer avoiding as a conflict strategy versus collectivists, who favour compromise and integrating (Cai and Fink, 2002). According to Holt and DeVore (2005), a conflict management approach differs by culture. Collectivist cultures, for example, prefer the compromise style to individualistic ones.

National culture theory is used to analyze the influence of culture in public relations techniques (Ki et al., 2019). The five cultural aspects identified by national culture theory are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and extended-short-term orientation. It can also use these dimensions can also be used in conflict resolution research. International project managers' conflict management approaches, for example, were found to have strong connections with cultural sizes. Based on a global data set, it was discovered that the characteristics of uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation impact preferences for conflict management approach (Gunkel et al., 2016).

### **Negotiation Techniques as Conflict Resolution Strategies in Public Relations**

Ni et al., (2018) explained that negotiation tactics are used to reach an agreement that is acceptable to both sides. In the dispute resolution process, public relations practitioners must know the most acceptable negotiating tactics. A few research on the use of dispute resolution methods in public relations has conducted. It stressed the importance of researchers and practitioners knowing far more about the process than they do presently. Scholars looked through conflict resolution literature to find techniques that may use in public relations. As a result, it applied the Thomas (1976) model to public relations and



came up with five negotiating strategies: fighting, cooperating, avoiding, compromising, and accommodating.

Then, in 1998, Plowman added two more strategies: unconditionally constructive and win/win or no agreement. It went on to describe two additional mixed-motive negotiating techniques: third-party mediation and principled bargaining. They just included persistence as another approach (Plowman and Walton, 2020); nevertheless, earlier research in public relations has utilized nine negotiating techniques (collaboration, contention, avoidance, accommodation, compromise, principled, win/win, unconditionally constructive, and mediation).

Academics have also studied cultural impacts on negotiating methods. Shin (2008), for example, in his study of religion's cultural influence, found that religious public relations practitioners are more prone to employ conflict, collaboration, and compromise. By their spiritual foundations, it is utilized as a negotiating strategy in settling problems. According to Plowman (2007), cross-cultural differences may lead public relations professionals to employ mutually advantageous negotiating tactics. In a multicultural setting, teamwork and win-win situations might be simpler to come up with.

## **Conclusion**

Scholars have stressed the importance of public relations as a strategic management process that public relations practitioners should successfully manage. Because public relations highlights connections between companies and their audiences, practitioners must manage these relationships when the parties are at odds. As a result, the responsibilities and duties of public relations practitioners in settling disputes were examined in this conceptual research. It also helps the public relations team to develop and conduct public relations initiatives successfully amid

internal disagreements, particularly those involving individuals. Public relations is an effective technique for managing an organization's image during a conflict when it is used to deliver the correct and enough information to the relevant public at the right time through suitable channels to comprehend the issue and gain favourable press.

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