

The Self-Factor and Dangling Professionalism: Towards Enabling Practical Public Relations

Innocent Paschal Ihechu, Ph.D

*Department of Mass Communication
Abia State University
PMB 2000 Uturu Nigeria*

Abstract

This paper looked at the place of self evaluation as a prelude to professional public relations practice. The problem was hinged on public relations abuses by some PR personnel in corporate organisations. The objectives of the paper were to create an understanding of the self factor during practice; Unravel behavioural exhibitions that germinate from self-concept; and identify practical application of self-concept to professional public relations practice. The method was qualitative relying on desk research analysis of existing literature as well as unstructured observation in the field. This paper is hinged on the Self-Perception Theory, it was established that PR process is, not a haphazard process and thus, must be consciously designed and executed guided by self-concept which is the innermost factor that defines us. Thus, it would be important to understand who we actually are so as to work on the aspects that offend organisational demands, while at work always. Based on appraisal of scholarly submissions and personal analysis of observed situation in certain organisations in Nigeria, it was concluded that self-concept identity enables the practitioner fathom out best practices that would endear him to the public and by extension, the organisation.

Key words: Self Concept, self factor, public relations, professional PR, perception

Date of Submission: 19-09-2021

Date of Acceptance: 04-10-2021

I. INTRODUCTION

We have always perused and become used to most PR texts. We have also always acknowledged theoretical postulations in the area of public relations. You will all agree with me that some of these theoretical positions are impracticable, especially, in our clime. That could be the reason most practitioners devised unethical approaches to market their organisations in a manner that suggests that “the public must accept my organisation as one with a favourable image”.

All through my years as a public relations educator, I have had encounters that got me thinking and probably believing that working on the individual practitioners could go a long way to strengthen the professional inclination of PR practice in Nigeria. That was how the topic tilted towards unravelling some conscious and unconscious actions and, or, inactions of the individual PR practitioners that could render a bandwagon effect on the organisation, negatively.

This belief gave birth to the psychological leaning of this presentation. This is obviously a new approach to re-engineering public perception of our organisations, through understanding the self-concept. Again, the coining of the topic was spurred by personal experiences within and outside corporate organisations, within professional gatherings, as well as relating those experiences with the words of psychologist Toni Collette that: “The better you know yourself, the better your relationship with the rest of the world” (Dahhaj, 2018).

1.1 Objectives

This presentation was designed to:

- i. Create an understanding of self-concept in communication;
- ii. Unravel behavioural exhibitions that germinate from self-concept; and
- iii. Identify practical application of self-concept to professional public relations practice.

II. METHODS

The presenter adopted desk research method involving textual analysis and analysis experiential information recorded through unstructured participant observations.

III. THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

This paper is hinged on the Self-Perception Theory proposed Daryl Bem in 1967. In simple terms, it illustrates that “we are what we do.” According to self-perception theory, we interpret our own actions the way we interpret others’ actions, and our actions are often socially influenced and not produced out of our own free will, as we might expect (Bem, 1972). When people are unsure of their own attitudes, one way to infer them is by looking at their behaviours. That is, the person’s attitudes and self-perception influence his or her behaviour (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973). Thus, self-concept preludes self-perception,

3.0 Public Relations as a Profession

Severally, we have relied on the British Institute of public Relation, BIPR’s definition of public relations as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics (Ihechu & Oduh, 2019, p.125) such efforts are practically engulfed in several activities which are executed by individual practitioners. PR process is, therefore, not a haphazard process. It must be consciously designed and executed. The consciousness starts with individual practitioners who must ensure that planning passes through some basic demands such as attention, deliberation, research, anticipation, analysis and consequences. If the self-factor does not play a positive role, all these considerations would not yield good fruit.

So, the practitioner must understand himself to be able to deal with any of the above issues, or, in the interest of the organisation, delegate to another who best fits the role. The research and analysis aspects are of utmost importance because they could help us understand if we were able to create mutual understanding in the first instance and thereafter devise means and strategies for sustenance of cordiality. This brings us to the demands of a professional practice.

According to Bernays (1986), a profession is an art applied to science in a manner that puts public interest ahead of personal gain. In other words, every profession, including PR, must pay attention to the interest of others to make a mark. That is why it becomes important to ask ourselves some basic questions, such as:

- Am I a professional?
- Am I truly practicing PR?
- What does the ethical code say about what I am doing?
- How does my public feel about my actions?
- Is my organisation losing or gaining from my actions/inactions?
- Etc.

By the time we attempt the above questions and more other questions, we would begin to realise who we really are. Remember some actions could be unconsciously ignited, but awakening our consciousness at all times would help remind us about the dictates of our calling. In turn we would be able to identify the attitudinal dispositions that run contrary to professional sensibility, and work on them to improve perceived image and in the long run enable an environment that would accommodate organisational goals and public interest. Professionally speaking, when an organisation invests on PR programmes, it expects the organisation to be better than it was, or better than it would have been if there was no investment. To make things change as expected, practical PR focuses on behaviour. According to Center and Jackson (2003) the type of change sought may be to:

- (i) Motivate new behaviour
- (ii) Reinforce existing positive behaviour
- (iii) Modify negative behaviour

Since PR seeks mutually favourable behaviour from both the organisation and its publics, an initial self understanding of the behaviour of the PR executive (or executioner) would be mirrored into the organisational behaviour which would eventually manifest into perception, image and reputation from public perspectives.

The question now is: How do we manipulate “self” by the self in order to be in a position to understand others and function appropriately, eventually?

IV. THE SELF-CONCEPT AND COMMUNICATION

It is always good to defend who we are; but it is not acceptable to impose ourselves on others, especially, when we are representing organisations. As PR practitioners, our publics see our organisations through us and therefore, the goal of the organisation and the interest of the public should be deemed paramount. After all, patronage of customers sustains the organisation we work for and by extension; the sustenance of our families depends on them.

Self-concept is the innermost factor that defines us. This is related to self-perception – the outer factor that showcases who we are from our understanding of ourselves – which has to do with how we perceive ourselves. As you already know, public perception is how the public perceive us. How one perceives oneself

plays “a central role in communication, regardless of whether the communication is in a daydream, in a journal, in a small group, or at a podium” (Pearson et al, 2008, p.45). Therefore, first step at being a communicator is to contemplate who you are. You may know some of your communicative attributes, you may not know some of them which may sound or look offensive to others.

That is why it is important to ascertain your personal identity so as to be able to work on those aspects that present negative impressions of who you are. To truly understand who we are, mastering communication symbols and language help us to develop self through the messages and feedback received – symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934 cited in Pearson et al, 2008). Finally, when we start behaving according to others, we have now attained the level of self-fulfilling prophesy (Wood 1997). As PR practitioners, that is the level of self-concept and self perception that we clamour for. Corollary to the above, it would be important to understand who we actually are so as to work on the aspects that offend organisational demands, while at work anyways.

V. CHARACTERISATION OF SELF-CONCEPT

Self-concept, as you already know, refers to how we perceive ourselves and this is formed, sustained and changed by our interaction with others (Adler & Rodman, 2006). Just as others affect our self-concept, our communication can significantly affect the self-concept of others. Thus, it is our professional duty, as PR practitioners, to manage our self-concept in a way it would create directed impression about ourselves and thereafter, infuse positive perceptions into the publics we serve. At the end, there would be a productive relational situation that adds values to us and the organisations we represent. It is worthy to note, at this point, that there are basically five categories of traits that can influence our self-concept. They, according to Lane (2008) are:

- i. Extroverted Vs Introverted
- ii. Agreeable Vs Antagonistic
- iii. Open Vs Not open
- iv. Neurotic Vs Stable
- v. Conscientious Vs Undirected

However, within these clusters, one could easily be identified as possessing the following personality traits.

- Sociability
- Spontaneity
- Selflessness
- Selfishness
- Independence
- Curiosity
- Vulnerability
- Carelessness

As you can see, some of the above traits are positive while some are negative. Therefore, to manage our self-concept, the Transfer-Process Model of public relations comes to mind. The model postulates that every negative situation should be managed and made to become positive, e.g., convert apathy to interest, etc. One would be wondering if it is possible to change self-traits which are most often than not, biological. The answer is a big yes. That is why we are trained to become professional communicators. We can do what ordinary communicators cannot. The next sections dwell on how to manage self-concept for the good of self, organisation and the publics.

VI. PERSONAL INFLUENCE AS OFFSHOOT OF SELF-CONCEPT

Casula (n.d.) submits that in public relations, human side of the profession is observed and valued as an indicator of discipline, competence and expertise. He further states that we need understanding in our discipline by searching for harmony reached by reflection on our way of being and acting in our professional field. We must always understand that, as PR practitioners, we belong to a whole set of relationships, which sustain and define who we are.

Nevertheless, there is a concept called reciprocal influence. What we do with others (NOT to others) influences others and also influences how they think about us. While some practitioners use strong instruments negative power, against others, such as, commands, control, hierarchy, finance, violence and blackmail; others use light instruments of positive power, such as non-violence, goodwill, kindness, courtesy, loyalty, attachment and efficiency (Hillmann, 2002). All these instruments are offshoots of the self-concept, self-belief and self projection. Emphasis is therefore placed on converting the negative qualities to positive ones; so as to achieve harmonious relationship with our publics all the time. It is on that premise that Cassula (n. d.) outlines some ingredients of achieving reciprocal influence for organisational good.

1. **Hope:** Hope is essential to life. In good times, it is a stimulus to achieve higher goals and better outcomes; in bad times, it is a comfort sustained by the idea of future relief, rescue and reward. Hope makes the PR practitioner not to act in a hurry and be able to gradually change what should be change (Morin, 2005).
 2. **Awareness:** This is the ability to know ourselves, understand what goes on inside our mind, heart, brain, bones and flesh (self-concept). It also involves the ability to identify what is going on around us so as to be able to act appropriately.
 3. **Resiliency:** This has to do with a belief of being in control of oneself and also being able to influence future events. It helps the PR executive to be able to transform negativity to positivity.
 4. **Moral Stance:** This has to do with observance of ethics, values and virtues and thus, deals with habits, behaviours and actions.
 5. **Opportunity:** The PR practitioner knows the value of his individual actions based on his own freewill. People have the freedom to act good or evil. Opportunity, here, implies that we must always use every available opportunity to market goodwill.
 6. **Niceness:** A professional relationship based on being nice helps to create, build and maintain solid and flexible relationships with different categories of the publics.
 7. **Yearning:** The PR consultant that is congruent with himself and consistent with his role knows the importance of his passion to perform. He is eager to do a good job: he yearns to be successful, to do his best, to fully express his potentialities and talents following the directives of his company and thus satisfy the stakeholder's expectations.
- Hope, awareness, resiliency, moral stance, opportunity, niceness and yearning are the seven notes of harmony as a tool in effective communication. When we forget or neglect one of these ingredients, our voice may sound hoarse, and out of tune or become a melancholic sound without any trustworthy meaning. In order to be listened to and believed as consultants or educators, harmony is needed. Harmony inside us and harmony in our relationships with others can help us to become truly effective.

VII. IMPROVING THE SELF-FACTOR FOR PROPER PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Experiential situations would suffice here to enable the understanding of how our subconscious being manifests our self-concept thereby affecting the practice of public relations.

SITUATION 1:

It was in a banking hall of a commercial bank in the country. A young lady went to the Customer Care Unit to report a transaction through ATM that she was debited but the beneficiary account was not credited. She was asked to fill a form. She asked for the form, all the customer care personnel did was point towards a rack of forms. The lady in question did not know what the form looked like; she asked the personnel who now shouted: "common for you cannot identify." Another customer assisted her. She took it to the table, and the personnel passed a pen to her. The lady begged: "Aunty, please help me fill it." The personnel replied: "There's nothing I won't hear. So all this 'shakara' you're doing is for nothing? Slay mama." The lady looked at her and walked away. It took one other personnel to call her back and eventually attended to her.

SITUATION 2:

The second scenario actually happened at a gathering of PR professionals. We were in a queue to collect gowns for one of the inductions. While we were on the line, people were jumping queue and the attendant was busy attending to them, thereby ignoring us. When I tried to remind him many people were on the queue, he shouted: Do you know who they are? The same thing ensued while we were collecting certificates. It was then I felt some people feel they own the association and their personality showcased that assumption.

About the first scenario, one could argue that the customer care personnel might not be a trained PR practitioner (they can as well do better). One could see that the self-concept of the first personnel beclouded her professional relationship because she could not relate properly with herself. The second scenario was questionable because the same organisers of an event to train practitioners failed to identify with their professional self; and therefore, projected a kind of perception that would discourage activeness of the inductees. It would have to be said that such actions emanate from self-belief that one is better than others. Therefore, treat and deal with people as if they do not matter.

Professionally speaking, anyone you come in contact with matters. That is why a practitioner needs to always change or alter self-concept for the sake of the publics. In so doing, the publics would see the organisation through the behaviour of individual practitioners. According to Pearson et al (2008) people could always want to change their self-concept "when it is inhibiting their development as an individual, an employee or a member of a family" (p.51). Hasling (1998) agrees with the above submission by saying that:

If you find any part of your self-image that is not serving you well, you can change it. We call the process cognitive restructuring – that means you can re-design the way you think about yourself so that your self-image becomes more like what you want it to be (p.153).

What you would want it to be in this case, would be to enable desired relationship with your publics. In order to change the aspects of behaviour that affect professional performance, it would be appropriate to identify who you are, how people see you and the overall impact of your attitudinal showcase. Thereafter, an attempt at improving the self-concept would suffice by borrowing from the steps outlined by Pearson et al (2008) as follows:

1. **Define your goal or objective:** What do you want to achieve by communicating with others?
2. **Make the goal more realistic:** Identify obstacles to achieving the goals both at individual and organisational levels. For instance, changing a negative perception to a positive one.
3. **Find information about how to achieve the goal (research):** What do people expect from you and the organisation you represent.
4. **Exercise Control and restraints:** You need time to adjust. Plan on how to gradually tackle the issues and monitor your level of improvement from time to time.
5. **Gain support from colleagues:** Let them understand your goal and assist you by reminding you of some mistakes that connote negative self-concept.
6. **Accept yourself:** After assessing your behavioral output and deeming it alright, you are good to go. There may be some obstacles along the line. One could be provoked, but always remember your goal and that of the organization – to attract goodwill.

8.0 Conclusion

This short piece made attempt at reviewing existing scenarios that depict actions that emanate from self-concept, self-belief and self-confidence. It pointed out the negative perceptions that existed because some professionals fail to relate with self before relating with others. The paper highlighted how we can improve professional PR practice by understanding how our actions can influence how people perceive us and the extent they would want to relate with us. Based on the above observations, it would be apt to conclude that relating with self, first of all, makes the PR practitioner become aware of the traits surrounding his or her self-concept. Then, self-concept identity enables the practitioner fathom out best practices that would endear him to the public and by extension, the organisation.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Adler, R.B & Rodman, G. (2006). Perceiving the self. In K.M Gilvin & P.J. Cooper (Eds); Making corrections: Readings in relational communication (4th ed). NV: OUP: 75-79.
- [2]. Bernays, E.L (1986). The later years: Public relations insights (1956-1986). New York: H & M Publishers.
- [3]. Center, A.H. & Jackson, P. (2003). Public relations practices; Managerial case studies and problems (6th ed). New Jersey: Prentice – Hill v .
- [4]. Hasling, J. (1998). The audience, the message, the speaker. New York: McGraw-Hill Hillman, J. (2002). The potent social intelligence
- [5]. Ihechu, I.P. & Oduh L. O. (2019). Advertising and PR research. Enugu: Iyk-Litto Publishers.
- [6]. Lane, S.D. (2008). Interpersonal communication: Competence and contexts. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- [7]. Oahhaji, Z.K. (2018), Why your relationship with yourself is the most important thing. Available at medium.com/@zaider/heres-why...
- [8]. Pearson, J., Nelson, P., Titsworth, S. & Harter, L. (2008). Human communication (3rd ed). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- [9].

Innocent Paschal Ihechu, Ph.D. “The Self-Factor and Dangling Professionalism: Towards Enabling Practical Public Relations.” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 26(09), 2021, pp. 23-27.