ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

Public Relations is a terminology that is frequently used to refer to the relationship between two or more individuals or groups who have common interests. It involves the efforts that are made by an individual, institutions or groups of people to win the support of those who are members of the community with whom they interact, encounter or associate, and whose co-operation is sought. In the sports circles, public relations has to do with the image that is projected by those involved in sports to the rest of the people in the community; such an image must aim at promoting good relations. The absence of good public relations among personnel involved in the various aspects of sports is bound to lead to unnecessary friction, frustration, disorder, division, unproductively and general lack of support or goodwill. It is against this background that the present paper reviews the importance and essential elements of good public relations in sports.

KEY WORDS: Public Relations, Publics, Communication

INTRODUCTION

Development of sports at any levels of society is an endeavour that requires the corporate effort of the sports managers, administrators and technical personnel on the one hand, and the rest of the members of the community on the other. In the course of discharging their duties, sports managers and administrators often become associated, either personally or professionally with many individuals, organisations and groups of people.

For instance, they meet and interact with many people who turn up to watch sports competitions, the organisers of such competitions, athletes and so forth. In most cases, the sports administrators and managers find it necessary, and are compelled to co-operate with or seek the assistance of the many individuals, organisations or groups of people whom they encounter in the working environments (Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). This means that sports personnel cannot successfully fulfill their mission without the co-operation and/or assistance of the other members of the community referred to as the publics. This calls for the need for those in the positions of leadership in sports to forge good relations with other persons and organisations with vested interest in the sports programmes (Broyles & Hay, 1979; Dougherty & Bonano, 1979). Broyles and Hay (1979) emphasise that the main function of public relations in sports is to provide a good image for the sports programmes and assist in promoting the programmes.

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN SPORTS

Public relations refers to planned effort to influence opinion and win support through socially responsible performance based on mutually satisfactory two-way communication (Fordham & Leaf, 1978; Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). It is technique of communication through which the public learns about, and appreciates the aims and accomplishments of an organisation (Fordham & Leaf, 1978). Dougherty and Bonano (1979) view public relations as the image that a given organisation or department projects to the community. Public relations involves good public impressions made by people associated with an enterprise (Fordham & Leaf, 1978).

In the course of discharging their duties, sports leaders often become associated, either personally or professionally with many individuals, groups of people, organisations and the general public.
Most often, the sports leaders, including administrators and managers, find it necessary, and are compelled to co-operate with and/or seek the support of the many people whom they encounter in their working environments (Frost, Lockhart & Marchall, 1995). To be able to secure the necessary attitudinal and material support of the various publics, administrators and managers must therefore forge good relations with the related publics and project a good image of their departments and programmes (Broyles & Hay, 1979; Bucher, 1979). Good public relations in sports helps in increasing the public’s faith in a given sports organisation and the sports programmes offered (Broyles & Hay, 1979).

Dougherty and Bonano (1979) emphasises the significance of good public relations in contributing towards the development of sports organisations and departments. They point out that a sports department or organisation that keeps the public continually informed about what it is doing and why is most likely to be held in high public esteem. Good public relations will also lead to the cultivation of cordial personal and working relations between the sports personnel or organisation and the other individuals or groups of people who have keen interest in sports, and thereby consolidate their efforts in promoting their programmes (Frost, Lockhart & Marchall, 1995).

**DEVELOPMENT OF A PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAMME**

The development of good public relations programme is a process that identifies several crucial steps and elements. Bucher (1979) emphasis that a public relations programme is something that must be planned with considerable care, and great amounts of time and effort are necessary to achieve the desired results. The programme must involve all those that are associated with the organisation or enterprise not just the top brass (Bucher, 1979; Dougherty & Bonano, 1979).

The steps or factors that are vital to the establishment of a sound public relations programme include the following:

1. One of the crucial steps towards developing a public relations strategy is to identify all the publics with whom an enterprise relates or encounters in the course of carrying out sports programmes (Bucher, 1979; Fordham & Leaf, 1978; Frost, Lockhart & Marchall, 1995). A public is each individual, organisation or group of people that has special interest in whatever you do, and with whom you want to establish communication. For those involved in the administration and management of sports, such related publics may include members of sports associations and organisations, sportsmen and sportswomen, sports councils, schools and colleges, coaches and referees associations, sports clubs, news media (the press), politicians, heads and officials of government departments, sports fans, and so forth. Once the identification of these publics has been done, it may be necessary to arrange them in priority order (Bucher, 1979; Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). In doing so, start with the public (person or group) that is the most important in so far as your overall mission and goals are concerned. For instance, a government department of sports may choose to rank sportsmen and sportswomen first, sports clubs and associations second, and so forth. While time and money limitations preclude formal relationships with each public, even the lowest ranked should receive some attention from time to time and depending on the prevailing circumstances. Each public, including critics, has a right to information pertaining to the conduct of the affairs of one’s office.

2. The other important step in developing a public relations plan is the determination of the reasons, purposes and aims for which you and your office or enterprise seeks to relate with other people and organisations. For instance, what do you intend to gain from forging good relations with sportsmen and women, sports clubs and associations, and so forth.
3. The sports personnel interested in projecting a good image of themselves, their functions and organisations must also recognise that the foundation for any such good public relations is acceptable and outstanding performance of the person himself and that of his office (Buchert, 1979; Dougherty & Bonano, 1979; Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1955). This means that good public relations must be earned and deserved, and this can only arise from exemplary performance. Those involved in sports leadership must be honest and uphold the very highest levels of professional and personal integrity.

4. It is important to set up effective and meaningful communication channels between the sports public relations personnel and their related publics (Fordham & Leaf, 1978; Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). Fordham & Leaf (1978) and Bucher (1979) emphasise that good public relations is based on communication, and it is important that the communication should be on a two-way channel basis. Effective communication from those involved in the administration and management of sports will enable their publics obtain information pertaining to the way they conduct their sports programmes and affairs. The publics have a right to the information, and withholding of any vital information may lead to unnecessary mistrust and suspicion, which may in turn lead to sour relations and lack of goodwill.

**TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION CHANNELS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Public relations endeavours are sustained by effective two-way communication channels between the concerned parties. The channels of communication at personal and group levels are varied and include the following:

I. Listening to others (Frost, Lockhart & Marchall, 1995). Listening is as much a part of good public relations as talking is. Listening represents a show of respect for another person's point of view and selfhood. People who listen and think are given full attention when it is their turn to speak.

II. Written correspondences with one's related publics is another important channel of communication that cannot be overlooked (Fordham & Leaf, 1978; Singer, 1976). One has to learn how to write letters that say exactly what one wants said. Start with roughing out letters, then re-write until you get them right. "Thank you" letters or notes also help in opening many lines of communication with those whom one intends to relate with.

III. Sharing is another tool by which one can develop two-way communication with those he/she seeks to establish relations with (Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995; Dougherty & Bonano, 1979). Public relations efforts may at times involve giving assistance or support whenever and wherever it may be needed. This means that public relations utilise the "give-and-take" technique involving, for example, those in sports management and those in the wider community. The sports manager is compelled to give such things as information on his/her sports department and programmes in return for any other support received from the public.

**PUBLIC RELATIONS APPROACHES AND PRACTICES**

The establishment of good public relations involves the recognition and adoption of several approaches and practices that are considered crucial to creating a desirable image for the concerned individuals, organisation or enterprise. Some of the most important approaches and practices include the following:-
a) Those sports personnel interested in having good relations with their related publics must recognise that they should have uninterrupted, effective and meaningful communication with their publics. The inevitable disagreement and conflict among people and groups who work together should not be allowed to cause a rapture in relationships (Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). Personal biases should not be permitted to adversely affect good public relations. It may not be possible entirely to avoid disagreement, conflict and personal biases but communication must be maintained.

b) To be successful in personal public relations and to make a positive contribution to the public relations effort of one's sports organisation, one must have a genuine liking for other people (Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995).Courtesy, concern for other people and listening to their problems helps in enhancing one's public relations image.

c) It is important to recognise possible friction points with your publics and learn how to defuse them. It is generally considered better to recognise them openly and work doubly hard to find amicable solutions to them and thus, facilitate and maintain two-way communication with the publics at their points rather than pretend they do not exist.

d) Public relations requires exceptional patience (Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). Despite good plans and good intentions, things may go wrong, and some people or publics may refuse to communicate but patience can bring things back on track.

e) Losing one's cool or expressing unnecessary negative emotions such as anger, scolding or pride is not good public relations, as this may lead to antagonism and may be cause of one losing friends and co-workers. Any information suggesting a negative or angry tone may cause problems for the sports administrator or manager (Broyles & Hay, 1979).

f) Objectivity in decision-making is one of the marks of highly professional (sports) administrators and managers. One has to make decisions in the absence of emotions, prejudices, and such decisions should be seen to be fair in the prevailing circumstances.

g) Always convey messages that are truthful and convincing. To be convincing, a message has to be built on truth, not falsehoods (Broyles & Hay, 1979). Information must be factual, honest and correct.

h) One's reputation is another important asset in public relation. It is indeed helpful and pleasant to be labelled capable, honest, truthful, sincere, hardworking, intelligent, open and human (Bucher, 1979; Frost, Lockhart & Marshall, 1995). It is through this kind of good reputation that one is able to win the support of his/her publics and develop a cordial and effective working relationship with them.

i) Whether they like it or not, sports and administrators and managers are in the political arena. This arises from the great interest politicians have sporting activities. As such, sports administrators and managers must devise ways of working with politicians in the development of sports without getting unnecessarily influenced by the politicians into helping them meet their selfish ends.

**CONCLUSION**

Good and effective public relations is emphasised in sports and many other sectors of work in society basing on the fact that no person or group of persons can live in isolation. The element of interdependence is inevitable.
To achieve success in their work, sports administrators and managers need the support of other people, most of whom they encounter in the course of carrying out their duties. They are therefore compelled to establish good and meaningful relations with people who have interest in sports, and whom they encounter in their fields of work, and whose support is necessary in their endeavours of developing sports.

REFERENCES


