Communication and Conflict Management: towards the Rhetoric of Integrative Communication for Sustainability in Nigeria's Oil and Gas Industry

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Abstract

Given the tempestuous nature of corporate-community relations in Nigeria, this paper contends that integrative and distributed communication can be a platform for managing conflict in the conflict-ridden oil and gas industry in Nigeria. Nigeria's oil and gas industry is habitually known for controversy and conflict as a consequence of mode of relations and communication amongst companies and wider stakeholders. Specifically, the wider stakeholders – the community people – have constantly accused the companies of not putting their views into consideration during corporate communication process as well as not living up to their billings in terms of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Against this backdrop, this paper proposes transcending this dilemma – conflict – via integrative communication, which naturally uses deliberation and mutual understanding grounded on the anvil of participation and shared leadership to bring about transformation. The methodology used in this paper is based on literature review of studies on the subject matter of conflict, communication and oil and gas sector in Nigeria. This paper hopes to deepen as well as extend knowledge on conflict management and communication in the oil and gas industry in Nigeria by critically appraising perspectives shared in the literature reviewed for possible change in modus operandi. A conceptual framework – integrative communication – is deduced from the literature, which can facilitate a process of re-conceptualising conflict management for sustainability.

Keywords: *integrative communication/engagement, sustainability, conflict management, Nigeria, Niger Delta, corporate-community relations; oil and gas companies*

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Introduction

The coming of the oil and gas companies in Nigeria has witnessed unprecedented conflict, unrelenting corporate-stakeholder criticism and protracted history of violence on the heels of oil extraction, distribution and politics (Nwagbara, 2010, 2013b). In the past two decades, there has been a proliferation of conflict in Nigeria in the wake of oil exploration (Suberu, 1996) and its attendant consequences (Okoh, 2005). Thus, the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in

Nembe Olobiri in the Niger delta in 1956 has provoked a lot of conflict, uprising and violence (Ojokorotu, 2008; Obi, 2009; Ikelegbe, 2005). This is essentially blamed on how these backwater is managed. Specifically commentators (Irobi, 2010) have attributed this poor landscape to poor communication framework in terms of conflict management. Thus, integrative communication management as opposed to linear communication, as this paper proposes can facilitate conflict management and peaceful co-existence as well as sustainability in the Niger delta region of Nigeria and Nigeria by extension.

There is substantial scholarship on how to understand waves of conflicts, which are associated with the multinationals (MNCs) in Nigeria (Irobi, 2010; Suberu, 1996). In doing this, most of the debates have been focused on conflict as a consequence of socio-economic and political contradictions following the MNCs' activities (Okonta & Oronta, 2003), as well as Federal government's neglect of environmental and governmental issues plaguing Nigeria (Ojokarotu, 2008). Although these perspectives are germane, communication is also implicated in corporate-community conflict in Nigeria (Irobi, 2010). Thus, this paper proposes that corporate-stakeholder conundrum can be better managed via effective, integrative communication strategies for a more sustainable future. The implication of communication in managing conflict is what Fairclough (1992) called "linguistic turn" in conflict management and communication, when communication is conceived as essential in riding the rough wave of corporate-stakeholder impasse. Thus, effective communication strategies and frameworks ensure penetrating the "realm of understanding" (Fill, 2006, p.42) through "shared meaning" (Manion, 1998, p.58) and shared leadership (Nwagbara, 2010).

This contention is in sync with mutual trust and understanding consequent upon shared values and aspirations that are couched in integrative communication and dialogue. Thus, implicit in (integrative) communication is mutual sense-making and sense-giving (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Central to the aim of this paper are communication skills; their mastery and execution are significant in conflict management and possible resolution of conflict (Kotter, 1990). Mastering and applying the art of integrative communication for sustainability and effective conflict management highlights a concept Barrett (2006) calls Leadership communication, which resonates with distributive communication and leadership for effective relationship building and sustainability. It is about transcending the illusion that what a corporate body or person communicates has been understood (Barrett, 2006: 389; Cialdini, 2001). This is what Bennis & Nanus (1985) consider as the management of meaning for sustainable relationship building. According to Rider (1999), the capability to communicate without any doubt puts someone in the lead. This is the mainstay of leadership communication. Leadership communication uses full range of communication strategies to overcome any interference for effective leadership. This is what Sergiovanni (2007, p. 120) calls "collegiality and intrinsic motivation", capable of bridging communication divide, as well as potent in managing/transcending organisational conflict such as corporate-stakeholder conundrum. This can advance sustainability and conflict management.

Literature Review

A typical outcome of organisational differences or incompatibility – of interests or merely expressed as disagreement occasioned by contradictory affiliations, power and orientations, among others – is conflict (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Conflict and organisational existence are indissoluble (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Conflicts are unavoidable in organisations because there are different interests, which shape organisational wellbeing. Also, conflicts exist because they are means by which organisations make adjustments, compromises and learn to adapt to changes (Linstead et al., 2004). Although conflicts are inevitable in organisation, how to manage them via communication for sustainability is essential given the communications

challenge that organisations face. Thus, integrative (and strategic) communication is essential in managing organisations successfully. Since conflict, organisational success and sustainability are inextricably related, it is better to rethink how to manage conflict, rather than avoid it (Blake et al., 1964). So, integrative or shared communication is central to managing conflict for sustainability as it tends to remove doubts in the minds of stakeholders.

Studies on conflict management suggest that conflict is complex particularly regarding how it affects organisational transformation and performance (Azar, 1990). In the Niger delta region of Nigeria, where most of the multinationals' or oil and gas companies operations are carried out (Ojokarotu, 2008; Obi, 2009), conflict is considered to be unabated and variegated in view of its prolonged nature. This is what has been characterised as "deep rooted" conflict. Azar (1990) concurs to this and considers it as protracted. According to Okoh (2005) conflict is defined as "contradictions arising from differences in the interests, ideas, ideologies, orientations and precipitous tendencies of the people concerned" (p. 92).

Irobi (2010) sees conflict as a struggle between groups that consider each other as incompatible. In the view of Deutsch (1973), it is a protest amongst aggrieved people in an organisation or in a social space. The methods and strategies utilised in managing conflicts are referred to as conflict management. Conflict management deals with strategies and processes that help to control or eliminate conflict (Botes, 2003; Aminu & Marfo, 2010). It involves effective ways of handling conflicts, communication challenges and complaints and the like to achieve organisational objectives as well as sustainable relationship.

In order to curb the ever-growing spate of conflict and violence in Nigeria as a consequence of the oil and gas companies' operation, integrative (constitutive) communication will help facilitate the process for a more sustainable future. Thus, studies on communication and management have shed light on the capacity of communication to bring about sustainability in relationship, which can drive change in the right direction (Kotter, 1990). Thus, for the oil and gas companies to effectively manage their organisational activities in Nigeria there has to be integrative communication process. This framework has the capacity to frame their style of operation and communication, which will create a sense of shared vision and commitment amongst various competing stakeholders to transcend organisational conflict. This will also help to foster peaceful and smooth business transactions between them and the host communities – wider stakeholders.

Communication and information are separate and can be regarded as opposite end of the same spectrum; however they are interdependent of each other. Communication is based on perception, which requires a message to be sent by somebody to a recipient who in turn decodes the message, thus communication involves at least two entities. On the other hand information is based on logic and is not enshrined in mutuality (Drucker, 2007). Communication is the sending and receiving of messages by means of symbols and in this context, organisational communication is a key element of organisational climate (Kotter, 1990). Communication is the process by which individuals promote meaning in the minds of others by means of verbal or nonverbal messages (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). The most uncomplicated conceptualisation of communication can be found within the Encoder/Decoder paradigm, in which communication is described as the transfer of information by means of a code (Ivancevich, 2002), where communicators understand each other based on shared social and communicative cues. However, where this is in short supply, conflict ensues.

In order for communication to be effective and shared within and outside an organisation for managing conflict, people's (stakeholders') views have to be factored in for mutuality. According to Ivancevich (2002) the degree of meaning in relation to understanding is quite often signified by the reaction of the recipient. In addition, Drucker (2007) argues that the fundamentals of communication are based on four variables:

1. Communication perception;

2. Communication expectation;
3. Communication demands; and
4. Communication/information relationship.

Communication perception deals with how a receiver of what is communicated sees or understands an issue; communication expectation deals with the degree at which what is communicated reflects a recipient's expectations. Communication demand is the challenge of communication in terms of what a receiver does with what is commutated; while communication/information relationship entails building or sustaining relationship as a consequence (Drucker, 2007).

The communicator is the person emitting communication and s/he must be able to communicate within the language of the recipient in order to be understood. Drucker (2007) contends that communication must be within the range of the recipient's perception so that they may be able to receive what is being communicated. There is an inherent expectation that we will expect to receive what is perceived. Thus, we see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear; and the challenge arises when what we hear or see is not congruent with our expectations. Thus, "The human mind attempts to fit impressions and stimuli into a frame of expectations" (Drucker, 2007). This also brings to mind the issue of communication demands. Communication demands refers to what is required will often stimulate the recipient to take some form of action; this may range from changing an opinion, attitudes, behaviours or to engage in a conversation (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996).

The foregoing demonstrates that communication is complex and requires a good measure of dexterity, relationship building and participation to build trust otherwise there will be conflict (Putnam, 2006). Hence, different interest are competing for attention and dominance in such process. This is at the heart of conflict and unabated corporate-stakeholder deadlock in Nigeria's oil and gas sector, where wider stakeholders have constantly alleged their interests are not given a voice in the communication process (Irobi, 2010). In contemporary organisational studies and management, representation of stakeholder interests in corporate communication has been lauded as providing a platform for engagement, mutuality and profitability as it serves as a springboard for dousing potential conflict (Freeman, 1984; Nwagbara, 2013a) as different individuals and interests are appreciably represented.

In addition, in corporate social responsibility (CSR) debate and corporate communication, a communication process that takes into consideration interests of organisations only is considered to be strategic and instrumental (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). This technically implies that information and meaning are more or less "packaged" or pre-determined by the sender of such information without inputs from the receivers (wider stakeholders). According to Christensen & Cheney (2011), this mode of communication is rather *transmission* of information, not *communication*. In fleshing this out, Trittin (2013) contends that transmission or mechanistic conceptualisation of communication

> *can be criticised for reducing communication to mere instrument and for neglecting the formative role of communication in constituting, altering, and perpetuating organisations* (p. 194).

This contention contrasts with the dialectics of sustainable relationship and integrative communication, which is normative, dynamic and shared; it is naturally opposed to a process that is not integrative and normative. The transmission approach is mechanistic and self-serving; while the integrative approach is distributed and sustainable.

Moreover, information exchange is regarded as the most basic function of communication and information is necessary for an individual or group to have a congruent and shared relationship within and outside the organisational setting (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). The absence of

this results in conflict within and outside the organisation. The historical corporate-staeholder conflcit in Nigeria's Niger delta, where oil extraction is carried out in Nigeria, epitomises how lack of integrative or shared communication (democratised/constitutive engagement) can create conflcit, where the stakholders (community people) have accused the oil and gas companies of not engaging them in their activities (Irobi, 2010; Nwagbara, 2010, 2013a). Thus, lack of enagement or communication can be attributed to the root cause of conflict in the region. This mechanistic form of communication shows that communication is used to advance organisational goals or interests as opposed to representing interests of all and sundry – wider stakeholders. This is the hotbed of conflcit and unsustainable corporate-stakeholder relations in the sector (Ojakorotu, 2008).

On the other hand, integrative (constitutive) model of communication contends that the transmision style of communication can be transcended if the basic role of language and participation in shaping the perception of social reality is appreciated, acknowledged and applied (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). In this framing, communication is perceived in a broard sense as a process that sees social order and sustainability as reliant on distributed communication, which transcends organisational goal by incorporating collective gain and objectives (Nwagbara, 2013b). Thus, "communication is theorised as a process that produces and reproduces – and in that way constitutes – social order" (Craig, 1999, p. 128). This conceptualisation of corporate communication in the oil and gas sector can be linked to a process that will institutionalise and perpetuate sustainable corporate-stakeholder engagement and social order for sustainability.

Conceptual Framework: towards the Rhetoric of Engagement

Given the above, this paper proposes integrative or distributive communication/engagement approach, which takes cognisance of inputs from wider stakeholders – affected people in the communication field – for inclusive debate that can engender trust, mutuality and identity (Putnam, 2006). This is a social-constructionist framework of communication that inheres in collective bargaining and mutual engagement for conflict management and possible resolution (Craig, 1999). This approach has the capacity to put organisational relations within the ambit of stakeholder management. As a consequence a normative and engaging organisation emerges "through the communicative practices of its members and stakeholders" (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 101). In this direction, corporate communication process is essentially one of many communicative practices that collectively constitute the concept that can be called "re-invented organisation" in the sense that there is immanent co-operation and dynamic interplay between the internal and external environments or communication field.

Communication and Conflict Management: towards Sustainability

Sustainability or sustainable development concept developed out of the contention that business growth and economic development (on a global scale) cannot be divorced from issues bordering on mutual representation, social justice and fair business dealing. Thus, as articulated in the United Nations' Brundtland Commission (formerly World Commission on Environment and Development) in 1987, the concept of sustainability contains a social justice and co-operation element. Within this scaffold, the issue of sustainability rests on what has been described as the three P's – people, place and planet or the three E's – economy, environment and equity. Central to sustainability is social, economic and environmental factors. In taking the sustainability concept further Desjardins (2000) stated that:

> *sustainability truly applies to practices that have an impact, positiveor negative,*
> *on the broader biosphere. Nevertheless, for convenience sake, we can talk about*

> *a sustainable business as a shorthand way of describing practices that, if generalised over an industry or economy,would make positive contributions to long-term economic, ecological,and ethical sustainability* (p. 14-5).

Given the above, integrative communication process has the capacity to foreground most vital elements that sustainability adumbrates. This is because such communication framework is shared, emancipatory and harmonious, which obviates doubts and mistrust. This is potent in fostering engagement and collegiality in corporate-community relation in Nigeria, where issue of triple bottom line is considered as a neglected phenomenon in corporate-stakeholder relations (Obi, 2009).

As stated before, the main reason for perceived corporate-stakeholder conundrum following the oil and gas companies' business activities in Nigeria is the nature of their business operation (Nwagbara, 2013a,b) and corporate communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Thus, to advance ethical/normative and social responsible business, rethinking the nature of the corporations' communications system is crucial. This process will help to reduce the incidence of triple bottom line issue, which as this paper contends is precipitated by poor corporate-stakeholder engagement – communication. As a consequence, a re-invented corporate communication that is stakeholder-based, bidirectional and integrative as this paper proposes will help in this direction. Thus, According to Lindgreen & Swaen (2010) communicating sustainability is about using integrative approach that involves:

> *stakeholders in two-way communication process. Key questions include what to say – and then how to say it – about an organisation's CSR programme and achievements, without appearing self-serving or risking stakeholder cynicism*
> (p. 2).

This is because communication is about sense-making (that is reciprocal cognition based on shared values and understanding) as well as management of meaning (Kotter, 1990) between corporations and other stakeholders for mutual representation of interests.

Consequently, it is not possible to have good human or organisational relations without communication (Miljković, 2008). Communication has become a central tenet amongst businesses, academics and practitioners across a plethora of different organisations (Nwagbara, 20013a). According to Drucker (2007) it is one of the principal means by which people affect one another. Within the industrial setting, communication is necessary for both conducting and advancing business purpose (Spaho, 2013). Whilst Communication is a commonplace tool that is used within our everyday lives it has the propensity to create dissonance between individual actors, organisations or countries as a result of its complexity, which in turn can create conflict by way of interpretation of what is being communicated and subsequently interpreted by the recipient.

Communication is one of the core issues surrounding conflict creation as it encourages the development of divergent views. Communication contextualises and gives further insight into conflict through its ability to translate emotions into conflict behaviours which creates a platform for future conflicts (Putnam, 2006). The predominant belief is that when faced with conflict, (good) communication is always the right thing to do (Kotter, 1990). Communication can be utilised in a variety of ways and within different contexts. Sociologist Thomas Luckmann once observed that "communication has come to mean all things to all me" (Luckmann, 1993). Within the business community, communication is indispensable component for conducting business (Spaho, 2013). Organisations are required to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, and during this process intricate interplay exists between two parties; thus, the role of communication becomes paramount, which can lead to functional or dysfunctional relationships.

Arising from the foregoing is that there are crucial elements that frame the dialectics of integrative process to corporate communication for conflict management and sustainable engagement. In recognising this wavelength, we conceptualise that for a more sustainable corporate-stakeholder relations in Nigeria as well as sustainable peace in the oil and gas sector, the following points need to be considered. These points will help to facilitate stabilisation, sustainability, peaceful-coexistence and perpetuation of integrative communication approach:

1. Organisations are arenas where meaning is continually negotiated. Therefore, there is need to anticipate and propose ways in which conflict arising from communication can be transcended for sustainable relationship between the organisation and the external environments.

2. In order for the organisations (oil and gas companies) to have the licence to operate – legitimacy – there is need for them to devolve sites of communication (and power arguably) for integrative and shared communication, which has the potential to advance corporate objectives in the final analysis.

3. Drawing from various studies on conflict management and communication reviewed in this paper, the integrative framework has the potential to facilitate better relationship between the companies and the communities – external stakeholders. The framework defuses conflict as it promises to involve all and sundry in the business of corporate management and engagement.

Finally, the integrative framework emphasises the need for shared, bidirectional engagement processes and strategies, which have the capacity to not only engender co-operation amongst concerned entities but to preserve organisational existence.

Conclusion

All organisations are required to communicate and as a consequence conflict will arise. This paper has analysed the importance of conflict management via effective and integrative communication management within and outside the organisational setting for sustainable stakeholder management and conflict. The context investigated is the Nigerian oil and gas sector historically known as a controversial and conflict-prone environment as a consequence of stakeholders' perception of the *modus operandi* of the oil and gas companies' oil extraction and distribution. The methodology adopted here is literature review bordering on conflict management, communication and the Nigerian oil and gas environment. In doing this, a conceptual framework – integrative (constitutive/shared) communication – was developed as a useful approach that can potentially be used by Nigerian oil and gas companies to transcend oil extraction dilemma in order to have peaceful and sustainable future in the Niger delta – and Nigeria in general.

Thus, it can be said that this paper has added to the broad church of ideas, approaches and theoretical paradigms that can be used to transcend corporate-stakeholder problems in Nigeria. Some of the ideas shared in this paper can be appropriated by policy makers, managers and other agencies in managing conflict in the oil and gas sector in Nigeria for a more sustainable future and for peaceful-coexistence in the country. In addition, this paper has illuminated ideas on conflict as an inevitable phenomenon that stirs organisations in the face but its effective management could facilitate better relationship between them and the communities, where they carry out their operations.

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