



ILORIN AS A BEACON OF LEARNING AND CULTURE IN WEST AFRICA

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CHAPTER 14

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION IMPACT ON HARMONIOUS INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILORIN IN A HISTORICAL CONTINUUM

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INTRODUCTION

Public Relations (PR) means many things to many people. Broadly, it is concerned with the reputation of an organisation and attempts at earning understanding and support from the organisation's publics (Theaker, 2000). As a management function, Public Relations attempts to "establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics" (Harlow, 1978, cited in Gbolagunte and Popoola, 2004, p. 4). To this end, effective use of language or functional communication is its major function, and this involves using words, the building blocks of language, to project good image as image is everything.

As far back as 1492, Antonio de Nebrija in the prologue to the *Grammatica Castellana* (*Castilian Grammar*) had posited that "language has always been the perfect instrument of empire" and many cultures and organisations have since then realised the crucial role of language in achieving both positive and negative ends (Nebrija, 1946, p.11). These positive and negative ends appertain to the functions of language to form, inform, reform, transform and even deform humans beings and their society (Adedimeji, 2005).

This paper examines how the University of Ilorin has developed a robust internal communication and public relations mechanism through which all the University community members are given a sense of belonging and through which an effective line of communication is institutionalised. It diachronically overviews the Nigerian university system and underscores its vulnerability to industrial crises and student unrest. It analyses the University of Ilorin as a foremost Nigerian university which has in recent

years carved a niche for itself as a role model for other Nigerian universities in terms of peaceful coexistence and industrial harmony among its management, faculty, staff and students who are of varying cultural and religious backgrounds. In other words, the paper examines how the University is using the integrative communicative system of print, electronic and online media to earn the support and understanding of its internal public for the purpose of maintaining harmonious relationships that engender peace and stability in the University.

Conceptualising Public Relations

Of all the functions of language, communication is the most important. As "a broad term that encompasses the ability of humans to interact in ways that enable them to share such functions as basic needs, wants, desires and ideas" (Cronin and Mandich, 2005 p.75), communication is a pervasive aspect of our day-to-day activities. Apart from the fact that we started communicating right inside our mothers' wombs, as human beings, we also spend as much as 75% of our entire life communicating (Tubbs and Moss, 2008 p.6). The essence of Public Relations is to communicate harmony of perception through language-mediated activities like publicity, marketing, advertising and propaganda. Thus, Public Relations is a deliberate, planned and sustained action to create, maintain and sustain cordial relationship, good rapport, mutual understanding, harmony and concord within and outside the institution seeking change and relevance (Akinfeleye, 2008, p.79-80).

In 1978, the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations agreed that "PR is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization's and public interest". The organisation's interest is usually that of seeking positive changes and relevance in relation to the expectation of the customs of the society. The Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom, in 1987, also defined PR as the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and understanding between an organisation and its public. Social change is central in PR. In other words, an effective and sustained Public Relations exerts powerful influence on the process of social and institutional change (Adedimeji and Azeez, 2010). Therefore, the aim of change poses a challenge as well as reminds the PR officer of

the need to maintain and sustain creative and dynamic institutional reputation through the effective deployment of spoken and written language.

Harrison (2000, p.2) avers thus:

Public Relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations practice is the discipline which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support, and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its public.

University Education in Nigeria

Higher education generally and university education in particular began for Nigerians with Bishop Ajayi Crowther who was the first registered student of Fourah Bay College, established by the Church Missionary Society in Freetown in 1827, and later his principal. As a pre-eminent first African university graduate, he was to receive an honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) honoris causa from Oxford University for his work on the translation of the New Testament to Yoruba, production of Yoruba dictionary and grammar among academic efforts (Fafunwa, 2010). The first attempt of providing a form of higher education in Nigeria began with the establishment of the Survey School in Lagos in 1908, later moved to Oyo, in 1934, after which Yaba Higher College was established in 1932. The Elliot Commission of 1943 was subsequently inaugurated to pave way for the establishment of University College, Ibadan, in 1948 under the University of London.

The inauguration of the Ashby Commission in 1959 was a watershed in the annals of university education. The Commission laid the foundation, followed by the Harbison Report on Higher Education in Nigeria, and served as a precursor to the establishment of full-fledged universities in

Nigeria. The University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Eastern Nigeria, was established in October 1960, followed by the University of Northern Nigeria (Ahmadu Bello University) in October 1962. The University of Ife and the University of Lagos were to be opened as well in October 1962 while the University College of Ibadan assumed its autonomous status as an institution in December 1962. These five universities, Nsukka, Zaria, Ife, Lagos and Ibadan "in order of ranking defined by age" (Fafunwa, 2010, p.22), constitute the first generation of Nigerian universities, along with the University of Benin, which was established in 1970.

The second wave of Nigerian universities began in 1975 with the establishment of seven universities by the Federal Military Government. These are the University of Ilorin, University of Calabar, University of Jos, University of Port-Harcourt, University of Sokoto (Usmanu Danfodiyo University), University of Maiduguri and Bayero University, Kano. The third generation universities can be considered as those established between 1979 (the state University era) to 1999 while the fourth generation universities were opened between 2000 (the private university era) and the present time. Generally, Nigerian universities are broadly classified as Federal, State and Private.

Concerns have been expressed that universities are proliferating in Nigeria. For instance, Fafunwa (2010) notes, "Between 1960 and 1991, a period of 31 years, a total of 31 universities were established. That is to say Nigeria was opening a university at the rate of one per year – a record that can hardly be surpassed by any other country. And as if this is not phenomenal enough, we now have 104 universities in 2010; that is 73 Universities established in 11 years at an average of 6 universities per year!" Despite the lamentation, just four years after, the number of universities has increased with additional 25 as Nigeria in 2014 had 40 Federal, 39 State and 50 Private universities.

The Establishment and Development of the University of Ilorin

When the Federal Military Government conceived the establishment of the University of Ilorin in 1975, perhaps they did not imagine that that they were creating a phenomenal watershed. Almost forty years after, the University has carved a niche for itself with quality graduates produced and positive impacts made all over the world such that the University

occupies a *numero uno* status among the 129 Nigerian universities in 2014. A child of destiny, the growth and development of the Nigerian world class university has been monumental. It is astounding to many to observe how the university, like a meteor, has shot through the skies to reach its distinctive position among the stars. While some attribute the achievements to God, and rightly so, others attribute the successes to the quality of the successive leaderships of the University. Perhaps, nothing clearly demonstrates the rate at which the University of Ilorin has grown under its various leaders over the years than a recent observable experience. At the beginning of the Prof. Is-haq Oloyede's administration in 2007, the University was not rated among the top 10,000 universities in the world. By 2009, the University had emerged from its rear, non-distinguishable position to occupy the second position in Nigeria and number 77 in Africa. By 2010, the University became the best Nigerian university, occupying the number 55th position in Africa. For a university that was not in the best 10,000 category three years earlier to have within three years surpassed about 6,000 universities in the world, including all Nigerian universities, is admittedly not a mean achievement.

By 2014, during the administration of Prof Abdul Ganiyu Ambali, the University has established itself as the most admired university in Nigeria. From the 8th most preferred university in 2011, the 5th most preferred in 2012, the 2nd most preferred in 2013, the University emerged as the most preferred in 2014, with over 105,000 applicants, thereby maintaining a steady progression to the zenith. The University has been internationally ranked the best University in Nigeria. The July 2014 ranking of "For International Colleges and Universities" (www.4icu.org) places the University 1st in Nigeria, 20th in Africa and 1,842nd in the world. It was the first time that a Nigerian university would be ranked among the best 2,000 in the world. The growth of the University, based on Oloyede (2010) and Adedimeji (2010; 2014) is phased into the stages of Formation, Consolidation, Actualisation, Transformation and Innovation.

The Formation Phase (1975 – 1982)

The University of Ilorin was established as one of the strategies of implementing the educational imperatives of the Nigerian Third National Development Plan. These imperatives mainly consisted of providing more opportunities for Nigerians aspiring to acquire university education and

generating high level man-power considered vital for the rapidly expanding national economy.

The University started as an affiliated college to the University of Ibadan and attained its autonomous status in October 1977, a year after its academic work started, its foundation students having resumed on Saturday October 23, 1976. The first principal of the College emerged in Prof. T. N. Tamuno, Head of History Department, University of Ibadan, in September 1975 but hardly had he settled down to his task than he was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ibadan. He thus left in November, three months after.

By December 1975, Prof. O. O. Akinkugbe, also of the University of Ibadan, was appointed the new principal. Prof. Akinkugbe made several visits to the then Military Governor of Kwara State, late Colonel Ibrahim Taiwo and the outcome of the cordiality was the ceding of a portion of the Kwara State College of Technology, as it was then known, to the University. The site served for many years as the University Mini Campus, later hosting the College of Health Sciences before hosting the University of Ilorin International School.

The administrative nucleus of the new university assumed life when in March 1976, Prof. Akinkugbe resumed in a rented apartment in Ilorin, which included a three bedroom Guest Chalet at 5, Forest Road, G.R.A, Ilorin. It was from this base that staff recruitment was done and by July 1976, a considerable number of academic, administrative and technical staff had been engaged to allow the smooth take-off of the University. The Administration then moved to a more visible and spacious location at Sabo-Oke, Ilorin.

With the staff recruited and the site given by the Kwara State Government under Col. George Innih, it was possible for the University to conduct an entrance examination consequent upon which 200 foundation students were admitted. The formal commencement of the University was October 23, 1976 with the principal's maiden address delivered by 10 a.m. at the Africa Hall. The following Monday, October 25 1976, academic activities began in earnest.

The University College started with three Faculties: Arts, Science and Education under the Deanships of Prof. O. Awobuluyi, Prof. M. O. Olofinboba and Prof. J. O. O. Abiri respectively. The pioneer Principal Officers were the Registrar, Mr. Olu Daramola; the University Librarian, Mr. B. A. Oni-Orisan; the Bursar, Mr. I. A. Oyawoye, and the Director of Works, Mr. R. A. Imohiosen.

Like his predecessor, Prof. O. O. Akinkugbe spent a short time at the helm of affairs and left office in October 1978, when he was appointed Vice-Chancellor, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. At the same time, the immediate past Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos then and Professor of Medicine, A. O. Adesola, assumed the mantle of leadership of the new University. Prof. Adesola, who died in 2010 at the age of 82, faced his new assignment with vigour and completed this first phase of the University in 1981, when he was appointed Vice-Chancellor of the University of Lagos.

Within its first three years, the University attained more form with the creation of additional Faculties of Engineering and Technology, Business and Social Sciences and Health Sciences. Also, the construction of the academic building (Blocks 1 to 10) and four lecture theatres was started, students hostels (villages I and II) were built, eighty bungalows with boys quarters as senior staff quarters (Phase I) were constructed and the road network between Tanke junction and the Main Campus was also completed (between 1978 and 1981). Prof. Adesola's administration also purchased and installed 11KV Generator which provided electricity and provided telephone network for the University. It was as a result of these efforts that 1,000 science-oriented students moved to the Main Campus for their studies, where full academic programmes began in January, 1982. At that time, which was the beginning of the tenure of Prof. S. A. Toye, additional two bungalow hostels and five multi-storey hostel blocks had been added to improve students' hostel accommodation.

The foregoing indicates that the formation phase of the University started essentially with the commencement of academic activities on the Foundation Day of October 23, 1976 and ended with the commencement of academic studies on January 2, 1982 by science-oriented students on the permanent site of the University. With the latter development, the journey towards making the University of Ilorin a single campus University

began and the process started the second phase of consolidating the gains recorded in the early years.

The Consolidation Phase (1982 – 1992)

With the movement of Science-oriented students, the second phase of the development of the fledging University of Ilorin began. The gains of the first phase were consolidated and pioneering this drive was another distinguished Nigerian don and administrator, Prof. S. A. Toye. Despite the economic recession of the period, Prof. Toye's management achieved considerable successes through its philosophy of unity of purpose as well as dynamic, result-oriented, honest and self-reliant operations.

Specifically, in order to achieve the desired developmental objectives that would consolidate the efforts of his predecessors, Prof. Toye's administration started to convert service-oriented ventures of the University to profit-oriented or revenue-yielding projects. Apart from the establishment of Unilorin Consultancy Services Centre in 1982, a self-reliant measure taken during the period was the adoption of direct labour approach to the execution of physical projects. This period witnessed the expansion of university structures, welfare schemes and programmes. The Faculty of Agriculture was established in 1982; the Law programme was started in 1983 (though it had to be phased out temporarily in 1985), the Postgraduate School was inaugurated in 1983 (precisely on the 8th of November) thereby assuming full control over what was before then the responsibility of the Board of Postgraduate Studies.

At the level of welfarism, with the Federal Government's directive that, as from October 1984, all federally-subsidised students' feeding should be provided by private caterers appointed by students, the University inaugurated a Students' Catering Committee. The Committee made the new catering system operational in November 1984 and monitored the quality, quantity, environmental sanitation and water supply to the canteens on campus.

For staff, a cost-saving new housing policy of Rent Grant/Furniture Loan was introduced in 1984. This policy replaced the previous one of providing partly furnished accommodation to senior categories of staff from USS 9 and above. The expansion and development of this period led

to the construction of 141 housing units for senior staff, consisting of 98 bungalows, seven mansionettes and nine blocks of four flats each, apart from additional 56 housing units at the University GRA quarters.

In order to supplement the limited subvention from the Government and mark its 10th year anniversary, the University launched a N20 million Endowment fund in 1985. The proceeds from this event were used to further consolidate the University achievements when Professor Adeoye Adeniyi assumed office as Vice-Chancellor in 1985.

As the first University of Ilorin Professor to assume the office of Vice-Chancellor, the former Dean of Health Sciences and longest serving Vice-Chancellor, Emeritus Professor Adeniyi administered the University with zeal and vigour. The University maintained its steady growth and development with more physical and infrastructural expansion. For instance, a block of workshops for the Department of Agricultural Engineering, as it was known then, was completed in 1988 while the University Library complex was completed in 1991. There were constructions of the Sports Complex Phase I, female hostels and the Faculty of Science Multipurpose Laboratory Phase I project was started.

The Actualisation Phase (1992-2002)

The University was not immune from the socio-political reality of Nigeria towards the end of military rule in the last decade of the 20th century. There were industrial agitations and combative unionism in tandem with the general mood of the country and collective frustration with the military rulers. Within this period, there were many industrial actions and their concomitant disruption of the academic calendar. To graduate in five, six or more years for a four-year programme during this period was the norm rather than an exemption. There was a need for the university to actualise itself.

There were internal disagreements and the engagements snowballed into the industrial crisis of 2001. Despite the occurrences of this period under the Vice-Chancellorship of Prof. J. O. Oyinloye (1992-1997) and Prof. Shuaib Oba AbdulRaheem (1997-2002), the University made great advances in all spheres of development.

Physically, Prof. Oyinloye's tenure witnessed the completion of the Faculty of Science Multipurpose Laboratory Phase I; the construction of the Faculty of Law Phase I as well as Lecture Theatres for the Faculties of Science and Engineering and Technology. There were also the constructions of offices, Students Centre, Block of Classrooms for the University Primary School and the Administration Block of the Unilorin Secondary School.

Apart from being a turning point in the history of the University towards the entrenchment of the stable academic calendar through far-reaching decisions, Prof. Abdulraheem's tenure is memorable for a number of developments. The administration started the construction of the seven-storey Senate Building and the 2000-Seater Auditorium both of which are now major landmarks of the University of Ilorin just as it began the PTDF Dam and Water Treatment Plant projects. His administration also constructed the central Power Station, Faculty of Science Phase II, hostels, some Departmental buildings, Lecture Theatre for the Faculty of Education, Sports Gymnasium, among others. It was during the period that the University adopted its well known slogan: "better by far".

The Transformation Phase (2002 -2012)

The period beginning from 2002 marked a watershed in the annals of the University as the institution was determined to overcome its challenges. Like a new dawn, which is actually the theme of the Strategic Plan of the University within the period, the University experienced monumental changes in all spheres of development. More than being a Nigerian university, the University began a determined ascension to the global scale. With expansion in academic programmes and faculties, students and staff, infrastructure and all facets of development, the period was a transformational period for the university.

Apart from completing the projects started by his predecessor, Prof. S. O. O. Amali undertook the construction of a block of classrooms for the Faculty of Arts as well as the Faculty Professorial Suites. There were also the "constructions of a Fitness Centre, a block of Classrooms for the University Primary School; Medical School Centre of Excellence, a block of offices and laboratories for the Department of Agricultural Engineering (direct labour) a block of offices and laboratories constructed for Sugar

Research Institute (direct labour); major land scaping and beautification of the University campuses; and the construction of a block of offices for the Department of Economics" (Oloyede, 2010). Donation of buildings by individuals and corporate bodies was also witnessed during this period.

The successes recorded by the earlier Administrations were taken a greater height by the Administration of Prof. Is-haq Oloyede. Over 220 building and construction projects were completed by his administration. This period was characterised by internationalisation and globalisation through which the University became a key player in African and international university system. With collaboration with scores of universities, research institutes and agencies all over the world as well as staff and student exchanges between the University of Ilorin and other world universities, the University attained, for all practical purposes, a world class status.

The transformation of the University of Ilorin was predicated on seven factors. These factors were: the adoption of best global practices, collaboration, research, provision of quality academic programmes, ICT development, funding development and steady academic calendar (Oloyede, 2010, p. 93-95). The combination of the university efforts in fulfilling its triple mandate of teaching, research and community service deservedly won first ranking for it in Nigeria, through which it became a model for other Nigerian universities.

Innovation Phase (2012 – date)

Basically, innovation is the creation of something new or the refinement of an established process or product to add more value to the society. According to Dorothy Leonard and Swap Walter (1999 p. 7) innovation is "the embodiment, combination, and/or synthesis of knowledge in novel, relevant, valued new products, process, or services". The University at this stage becomes innovative and it has emerged as the fastest-growing Nigerian university. The commitment to making the University a 21st century citadel of learning has undergirded the digital revolution in the University under the leadership of Professor Abdul Ganiyu Ambali.

The University has grown to an institution of 15 Faculties, providing quality education that allows students not only to collect the dots of knowledge but also to connect them. The gains of the innovation are

evident. By 2014, the University has established itself as the most admired university in Nigeria with over 105,000 applicants applying to study at the institution (Adedimeji, 2014).

The University is also innovatively embarking on ground-breaking projects, investing in plantations, creating industries and new programmes as well as equipping staff and students with the appropriate technology that aligns with the age of innovation, the Information Technology Age. The distribution of PC tablets, the installation of fibre optic cables internet backbone with capacity for 155 megabits per second (from the previous 15 megabits per second), the multi-functional ID card that serves as an ATM card, access control facility apart from its traditional identity function and the re-designing of both intranet and internet facilities in the University make the University to be globally competitive and nationally relevant.

Harmonious Relations and the Three-track model of the University of Ilorin

The University of Ilorin has maintained a reputation for stability, peaceful and harmonious co-existence and uninterrupted academic calendar. How the University has maintained industrial harmony and avoided student unrest since 2004 is predicated on an integrated communication/ Public Relations model that consists of the official newsletter of the University, *Unilorin Bulletin*, the use of the Internet and Radio. Perhaps, it would not have been easy to achieve the glory the University of Ilorin has achieved without its emphasis on earning the support and understanding of its internal publics that is constituted by the students and the staff. So, Public Relations as a management function is prioritised by the University and this is demonstrated by the emphasis the University places on providing information.

As Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (1995) observed, Public Relations is a tool for strategic management, and this is the hallmark of the successive administrations of the University from its formative phase through to the innovative stage. The role of Public Relations in this regard is underscored by the system theory that provides a theoretical underpinning for thinking about the roles of public relations because it stipulates that an organisation's well-being or otherwise is dependent on establishing and

maintaining relationships both within itself and with its environment. Thus, as Quirke (1995, p. 71-75) averred, "the flow of ideas, information and knowledge around the organization [is] crucial to success. The role of communication as the process by which this flow is achieved is central to the management of the organization". He added that:

A business can only achieve its best when everyone's energies are pointed in the same direction and are not at cross purposes. Employees need to have a clear picture of the overall direction and ambitions of the company and a clear sense of where of where he or she fits in and how they should contribute to the company's goals.

Quirke's observation points to the need for change reflected in the shift from a limited number of internal communications techniques such as notice boards and memos to more sophisticated media of newsletter, radio and a more interactive medium of the internet. With the three-track media model that engenders a functional relationship while allowing little or no room for rumour-mongering, the University has maintained a stable academic calendar for more than a decade, a rare development within the Nigerian public university system. Using the integrative communicative system of print, electronic and online, the University has developed a robust internal communication and public relations mechanism through which all the University community members are given a sense of belonging. Information is, therefore, provided 24 hours a week on radio, communication is distilled every week via the newsletter and the University community is engaged by the interactive internet system that also fuses both radio broadcasting and news streaming together.

Through this communication system and Public Relations strategy, students and staff are adequately informed and carried along in the University activities. Mutually beneficial relationships are created and sustained between the University management, staff unions and students. The University thereby is seen as a collective legacy that where everyone has a role to play.

In specific terms, through the weekly *Unilorin Bulletin*, members of the University community are provided hard and soft news about the important events in the University. Thus, the members of the University community are well informed through the newsletter, and rumour mongering, though part of any organisation's informal communication strategies, is minimised to the barest level. The understanding and support of the internal publics of the University is thereby earned, which, in effect, minimises conflict. With the inauguration of an Editorial Board for the *Bulletin* in February 2008, the management of the weekly newsletter was energised resulting in greater quality in content and design/layout that makes it a compelling information dissemination organ of the University.

Apart from the staff e-mailing opportunities the internet has provided to augment internal communication within the University of Ilorin, it has also provided the opportunity of media convergence that allows the internal publics to access the contents of the weekly bulletin on the University portal. Soft copies of the weekly bulletin are sent to all staff through their email address lists. Soft copies of the bulletin are also archived on the University portal for easy access by any staff that is outside the country.

The University of Ilorin FM radio (89.3FM) has sufficiently served as a veritable organ of internal communication for harmonious relationships between the University management and the internal and external publics of the University, consisting of students and staff. Announcements are made through the radio, information is passed to the internal publics with flexibility and staff are mobilised effectively through radio for programmes and activities of the University. Generally therefore, adequate and effective information is provided 24 hours a week on radio, while communication is distilled every week via the newsletter, and the University community is engaged by the interactive internet system that also fuses both radio broadcasting and news streaming together. This represents an innovative three-track model of internal communication that has facilitated harmonious relationships within the University and which has made the University unique in its drive for excellence and glory.

Conclusion

To maintain harmonious industrial relations in the Nigerian university system, an effective internal communication system is desirable. The University of Ilorin model by which information is provided 24 hours a week on radio, communication is distilled every week via the newsletter and the University community is engaged by the interactive internet system that also fuses both radio broadcasting and news streaming together is a model that could be adopted or adapted to ensure peaceful and harmonious relationships among other stakeholders in the university system in Nigeria. The model can guarantee the stability in the system, which has been a major challenge of university education in Nigeria. Indeed, peace is achievable in complex situations if communication is provided because it is when communications break down that crises assail human societies, especially a University community.

This paper has attempted an overview of the concept of public relations and the central roles played by language and communication in its delivery, with specific reference to a foremost Nigerian university. The paper traced the origin of university education to the colonial era and highlighted the growth and development of the Nigerian university system. Using a historical approach, the paper examined the trajectory of the establishment and development of the University of Ilorin and identified five phases, including Formation, Consolidation, Actualisation, Transformation and Innovation, with their major hallmarks discussed. It is contended that peaceful industrial relations and harmonious coexistence in the University are chiefly predicated on a robust and efficient information management system through which the internal and external publics of the University are kept abreast of the University activities. This system comprises a tripartite model of newsletter (print), radio (electronic) and Internet (online) systems. It is submitted that in a situation where information is available, people are empowered but when there is no information, rumours, gossip and communication gap that engender disharmony gain ascendancy thereby creating mistrust and conflict.

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