The Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) and Promotion of Good Employer-Employee Relations in Nigeria Local Government Service in the 21st Century

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Doi:10.5901/miss.2013.v4n2p607

Abstract

The work is about improving the working relationship between the management which represents the employer and the workers that represent the employees in the local government service system. The main objective of the work is how to address the high level of suspicion on the organization which had characterized the relationship between the labour (workers) and management in the local government service at present in Nigeria. This has been responsible for low output performance at this third tier level of government in Nigeria. The study adopted a theoretical framework of analysis which helped, in explaining the causes of the constant struggle, mutual suspicion, antagonism and hatred which had existed between labour and management in organizations, especially as it applied to the local government service in Nigeria today. The theoretical framework adopted was the scientific management theory as propounded by Frederick Taylor in 1911. This theory apart from explaining the basis of conflict between labour and management in organization: also proffered some possible solutions on how such conflicts can be amicably and mutually resolved to the benefit of both parties. The major findings of the work showed there are so much antagonism and inefficiency within the local government service in Nigeria today. This had been attributed to the fact that labour and management are permanent enemies, and both struggle to undermine each other's efforts. The solution to the problem as identified in the work lies in the promotion of good employer-employee relationship in the local government service through the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) playing some expected positive roles. Some of these expected positive roles by NULGE amongst other things have been aptly captured and discussed in the main body of the work.

Key Words: Local Government, Employer-Employee Relation, Union, Management

1. Introduction

Labour-management relationships in Nigeria are characterized by suspicion. Both labour and management, especially in the local government service system, struggle to undermine each other's efforts. This view is strengthened when one considers the union's belief that the government with its enormous power is constantly seeking for ways to suppress employees' organizations. This fear is founded considering the number of unions that have either been proscribed or rendered impotent by the government in the past. It is also supported by the recent anti-labour law, which the Federal Government recently sponsored and secured approval from the National Assembly.

The main focus of this work is to find out the reasons behind the high level of suspicion which had characterized the relationship between labour and management in the local government service in Nigeria in recent times. Secondly, to examine whether the hostilities, antagonism, conflicts and mutual mistrust between labour and management are responsible for the present low output performance being experienced at this third tier level government in Nigeria today.

Finally, it is the objective(s) of this work to analyze the role Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) could play to bring about harmonious working relationship between the workers and management in the local government service to guarantee improved productivity. Furthermore, how can the present problem of so much antagonism and inefficiency, as well as labour and management being permanent enemies in the local government service in Nigeria, be explained through the adoption of the scientific management theory of Frederick Taylor as the theoretical framework of analysis for the study? Also, what is the way forward as could be deduced from the application of the theoretical framework of analysis to the work?

2. The Bases of Scientific Management as the Theoretical Framework of Analysis for the Study

The bases of scientific management are efficiency and economy. In his book, *The Principle of Scientific Management*, Taylor (1911:20) stated that "the principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer coupled with the maximum prosperity of each employee." For the employer, "maximum prosperity" means not just large profits in the short term but the development of all aspects of the enterprise to a state of permanent prosperity.

For the employee "maximum prosperity" means not just immediate higher wages, but his development so that he may perform efficiently in the highest grade of work for which his natural abilities fit him.

The mutual interdependence of management and workers, and the necessity of their working together toward the common aim of increased prosperity for all seemed completely self evident to Taylor. He was then driven to asking, why is there so much antagonism and inefficiency? Why are labour and management permanent enemies? He came out with three answers:

- 1) Workers falsely believed that any increase in output inevitably result in unemployment.
- 2) The system of management was so defective that each worker thought it necessary to restrict his output in order to protect his interests (Systematic soldering)
- 3) The methods of work were inefficient.

Taylor conceived that it was the aim of Scientific Management theory to overcome these obstacles. In order to achieve this, management must discover the most efficient methods of performing the job, and then a systematic study of the most efficient methods of controlling the workers. Taylor said that "what the workmen want from their employers beyond anything else is high wages and what employers want from their workmen most of all is low labour cost of manufacture... the existence or absence of these two elements forms the best index of either good or bad management."

The application of the scientific management theory to the study revealed the causes of the inherent hostilities, conflicts, antagonisms, mutual suspicion, mistrust and inefficiency which had characterized the relationship between workers and management in the local government service in Nigeria in the recent times. The scientific management theory revealed the truth which was self evident in the poor and lack of good harmonious working relationship between labour and management in the local government service which are that workers above anything else constantly demand for higher wages while the management in return want to keep the cost of production as low as possible. In the attempt to find an acceptable middle course or benchmark for understanding both parties (labour and management) engage each other in bitter struggle. This tends to reinforce the eternal hostilities and conflicts which are self-evident in the working relationship between workers and management. Finally, the application of the scientific management theory to the study helped, in proffering some possible solution on how to end the hostilities and antagonism between workers and management.

The identified solution or way forward include: adequate positive motivation of employees; mutual and cordial relationship with the political leadership in power, effective communication between employers and employees; good collective bargaining and labour relations within the local government service; etc.

3. The History of NULGE

According to Ozor (2003:116), the NULGE is an umbrella organization championing the cause, welfare and interest of all workers employed in local government in Nigeria. History has it that the present NULGE was formed in 1978/79, but the origin of a national union for local government employees in Nigeria dates back to 1943 when the Federal Union of Native Administration Staff (FUNAS) was first registered as a trade union. This union was said to have changed its name to the

Nigeria Union of Local Authority Staff (NULAS) in 1946. Fashoyin (1999:222) posited that the Nigerian Native Authority Union (NULAS) was formed in 1919, though it was not officially registered as a trade union then. History has it that it was after its aborted Sixth Annual Delegates Conference scheduled at Mapo Hall, Ibadan, in 1951 that the Eastern District Branch of NULAS went home and formed the Nigerian Association of Local Government Employees (NALGE). It (NALGE) was deregistered in 1966 for falling foul of the Trade Union Act. It was in 1978 that through the efforts of local government workers the present body, Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) was formed and subsequently affiliated to the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).

The broad objectives of the NULGE are as follows:

- 1) Organization of workers who are qualified for membership;
- 2) Establishment and maintenance of just and proper hours of work, rates of pay, and conditions of work;
- 3) Establishment and maintenance of a high standard of workmanship and professional practice;
- 4) Advancement of the education and training of members and employees of the local government;
- 5) Promotion of the welfare of members;
- 6) Encouragement of dialogue and participation in the decision-making process of its members at the local, states and national/federal levels;
- 7) Protection and enhancement of the socio-economic and cultural interests of members;
- 8) Cooperation with other trade union bodies and the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) in championing the causes and welfare of workers generally and local government employees in particular (Agalamanyi, 2004:4).

4. The Role of NULGE in Sustaining Good Employer-Employee Relationship

Both scholars and practitioners agree that NULGE is major stakeholder in local government administration in Nigeria. As an important stakeholder NULGE has a vital role to play in improving and sustaining good employer-employee relationship in the local government system. NULGE as available literature and research (Nwankwo, 2000) reveals can facilitate sustainable good employer-employee relationship in the local government system through the following ways:

4.1. Guaranteeing Adequate Motivation of Workers

Motivation is one of the most researched and discussed subject areas in both public and private sectors' management. Researchers have sought to explain how and why people are actuated to behave as they do and how they can be made to behave in a manner supportive of organization's goals.

According to Werther and Davis (1981:261) motivation can be defined as "a person's drive to take an action because that person wants to do so." If a person is pushed to act and he acts, his action would be a reaction to pressure. In other words, he acts because he feels that he has to do so. However, if he is motivated to act, the action would be based on a positive choice to do something that is meaningful to him.

It is a fact that no matter how well or efficiently an enterprise is organized and equipped, not much progress is made until the human resources of the organization are motivated to perform.

There are two types of motivation: positive and negative motivation. In positive motivation, a superior officer influences another officer (his subordinate) to do his will by making the subordinate realize that he stands to gain or profit or get a reward (money, status, promotion, etc.) as a result of his action. In a negative motivation, on the other hand, superior officer influences his subordinate to do his will by making the subordinate realize that he stands to lose (recognition, status, money, etc.) by his refusal to act in accordance with the superior's will.

In the first type the subordinate takes the action because it is in his interest to do so. In the second type, he takes the action because it is in his interest not to refuse to do so. The dissimilarity in the two is that in the first case one is offered the possibility of a reward if he does the will of the superior whereas in the second case he is assured a punishment if he refuses to do as he is expected. Both types of motivation are acceptable and applicable in every organization.

It is important to emphasize that in order to promote good employers-employee relationship; NULGE has to play a vital role of ensuring that management uses more of positive motivation than negative motivation in motivating workers to put in their best. This the NULGE can do by maintaining good cordial and symbiotic relationship with the employer as typified by the management. It may be pertinent to emphasize also the NULGE as a trade union or umbrella representing the local government workers should constantly strive to be partners in progress with the management by getting involved in promoting those policies which will bring about increased productivity and harmonious working relationship.

Some of these include: condemnation of absenteeism, truancy, lateness to duty, corruption and wastefulness by the workers. Similarly, NULGE should support regular promotions, prompt payment of salaries and allowances, creation of conducive working environment, in-service training, etc. Therefore as Frederick Taylor observed, NULGE should strive to secure the "maximum prosperity for the employeer" coupled with the "maximum prosperity of each employee."

4.2. Relating Well with the Political Leadership in Power

Local government employer is the state government, which is personified by the State Governor. The State Government sets up the Local Government Service Commission which oversees the affairs of the local government councils in the state. Also, the local government statutory allocation which comes from the Federation Account monthly is paid into the State-Local Government Joint Account. The State Government exercises reasonable measure of control over the State-Local Government Joint Account from which the salaries and other benefits of local government employees are paid.

The point being emphasized above is that for good employer-employee relationship to exist in the local government service, the NULGE which is the umbrella that caters for the welfare of the local government employees must be proactive by being supportive of the leadership of the state government. It is important to mention that gone are the days when there is this false assumption that there is inherent eternal or perpetual enmity between management and the workers. Similarly, gone are the days when in Nigeria if the labour leaders attend government function, pay courtesy call to the government, share common views with the government on matters of common interest; such leaders will be branded as pro-government, government stooge or has been settled by the government. Our question is, what is wrong if being pro-government, and having good romance and understanding with the government, will put food or meal on the table of the employees? It is important to point out that gone are the days when unnecessarily attack on the government in power or estranging the Union from the government by the leadership is held as "bravo" and the best policy. Past experience has shown that any leadership of a trade union which decides to be in opposition to the government in power most especially where the majority of its members are employees of the government, usually find things extremely too difficult. This is because it often leads to the incarceration of the members of the leadership; humiliation and battering of the workers, because intimidation in form of denial of salaries, demotion, denial of promotions, punitive transfers, dismissal from service, etc. are often employed by the government as a retaliatory measure against the Union leadership and its members. Therefore, commonsense and experience have shown that mutual understanding symbiotic relationship, dialogue, negotiation, compromise and cooperation are the best virtues, which Union leadership like NULGE should regularly pursue as a guiding principle, which will enable the Union to facilitate good employer-employee relationship. Our suggestion is that the leadership of NULGE should be properly grounded in real practical politics. They should be politicians wearing bureaucratic coat as a form of camouflage. In other words, the NULGE leadership should know how to penetrate the government through her various agencies such as political advisers, members of State Assembly, National Assembly and the leadership of the ruling political party in the state. The NULGE leadership to be able to play the role of facilitator of good employer-employee relationship in the local government service, should adopt such a standing policy that any government that comes to power the Union should be freely disposed to work with such a government for the overall interest of the state but most importantly of that of its members.

4.3. Maintaining Effective Communication between the Employer and Employees

All social systems require communication in order that meaning may be transmitted. Communication means the act of imparting a common idea or understanding to another person. It covers any type of behaviour that affects an exchange of meaning. According to Felix Nigro, the ability to communicate is one of the least developed in relation to organizational needs. Part of the difficulty is the "inadequacy of language to carry precisely the ideas of the sender." Certain words do not convey the same meaning to everyone. Observation of any organization on any single day can provide many instances of faulty communication. Perceptive skills as well as good and impeccable intention are required in communication. The greatest error in communication is the assumption that understanding exists.

Developing individual communication skills, however, will not solve conflicts rooted in basically opposed value systems. Nor are management and workers also able to communicate effectively with each other even though their messages may be exquisitely logical and beautifully reasoned. Marxism-Leninism assumes an inherent hostility between management and labour. This hostility in our own point of view is no longer held as valid today. There is good understanding and mutual appreciation between government and labour in today's time.

The need for effective and regular communication between the management (employer) and the employees to

enhance good relationship cannot be overemphasized. The NULGE as a facilitator should ensure that there is both good downward and upward communications between the management and employees. Downward communications refer to the directives and other messages that originate with the officials at the top of the organization and transmitted down through the hierarchy, through the intervening level of supervision. The traditional approach to administration concentrated on this kind of communication and generally ignored the other two. It assumes that management knows what is best for the organization and the employees. Thus decisions are made at the highest levels and let to drop smoothly down the hierarchy.

A research study done in the USA known as the Hawthorne experiments showed that downward communication is resisted if workers do not have an input in the making of the decision.

In large organizations, downward communication is difficult because orders must go through numerous intermediate levels before the point of execution is reached. If little upward communication exists, the difficulties are multiplied because the workers tend to resist the orders as unrealistic.

In upward communication, messages are passed from the lower levels of the hierarchy up to the management. There are numerous barriers to upward communication. These include:

- (a) Physical distance or inaccessibility
- (b) Screening distortion and/or dilution at each level
- (c) The attitude of the supervisor
- (d) Inferior position of the subordinate; and (e) Tradition

Workers are often separated by great distances from the source of authority at the top of the organization's hierarchy. Some especially the field staffs are equally separated from the authorities at the headquarters by physical distance. Hence they have limited opportunities to see their superiors and to express their ideas fully to them. The larger the organization the greater the number of links between the worker at the bottom of the hierarchy and the boss at the top of the hierarchy.

Any communication coming from a worker at the lowest level must pass through several channels before it reaches the desk of the Chief Executive, and by the time it reaches there it must have lost its spontaneity or its true meaning after it must have gone through screening and the filtering process at each level. According to Harold L. Wilensky, "Even if the initial message is accurate, clear, timely and relevant, it may be translated, condensed or completely blocked by personnel standing between the sender and the intended receiver; it may get through in distorted form." Whether the information ever gets through at all depends on whether it is favourable or unfavourable to the officers between the senders and the recipient at the top of the hierarchy.

Good news flow to the top of the hierarchy faster than bad news. There is tendency for supervisors to edit reports in order to present a brighter picture. In most organizations, the people at the top of the hierarchy are prevented by subordinates from getting the true picture of what goes on in their organization. They may appear to outside observers as unbelievably blind to what goes on in their organization.

By being a Chief executive one is expected to have a vantage point that provides him or her a broader view of operations. In practice, however, executives who are not afraid of problems and who want the true picture are still apt to be victims of a "Conspiracy of smoothness" or the tendency of their assistants to protect them "against discomforts and unpleasantness" (Nigro & Nigro, 1977:239; Appley, 1956:195).

Subordinates have a tendency to feel that since they are employed to solve problems that would normally pass through them on the way to their superiors, the less the number of complaints or problems that make it to the superior's desk, the more they are judged effective, and therefore, the brighter the reports getting to the Chief executive the better their performance rating. In other words, if all the reports – good and bad – get to their superior's desk without being filtered or reduced, they must not be carrying a fair share of the burden of the administration or management.

Whether they perform up to expectation or not, subordinates claim credit for the good performance of their organization or share the blame for its poor performance. As a result they would feel uneasy to communicate to their superior how badly their organization was doing. They would rather communicate only the good news hoping that the gravity of the situation would change and that the bad news would change to good news before their superior would know about them.

To create the situation where an executive gets the true picture of the happenings in his organization, the executive should appoint people who would not only help to solve problems or look into complaints that would normally come to their desk, but would also tell the Chief executives problems that still exist or appear intractable even if the knowledge of such a situation would hurt the executive's feelings.

The fear of presenting views opposed to those of the superior is discouraging. People who are tenured in their job

or people who feel secure in their positions tend to be most frank in expressing themselves to their superiors.

Felix and Lloyd Nigro claim that "Upward communication is in a very important sense untraditional. It is like rowing upstream, against the current. Downward communication has a great force of tradition behind it" (Nigro & Nigro, 1977:240). There is little or no difficulty anywhere for a superior to communicate with his subordinates whereas the reverse presents a difficulty in many organizations. Even when a Chief executive encourages upward communication, subordinates are reluctant to take advantages of the situation because of their acceptance of an inferior status, couple with their fear of taking a risk by by-passing their immediate superiors. Moreover, Chief executives do not devote enough time to hearing from subordinates way down in the hierarchy structure even when they claim to operate the open door policy.

The NULGE has the important role of facilitating good employer-employee relationship in the local government service by ensuring there is effective and efficient downward and upward communications within the system. Both the employer and the employees through the activities of the NULGE should be able to pass information freely to each other to remove mutual suspicion and increase cooperation.

The NULGE can facilitate good downward communication within the system by ensuring that the following channels and media of communication are put in place and regularly serviced. These are:

- The Chain of Command: This is the principal means of communicating down the hierarchy. Information or orders descend from a higher level either on a face to face basis or in writing.
- 2) Posters on Notice Boards: Some important information are posted on notice boards or written on posters in strategic positions in the work place.
- 3) Loudspeaker System: This system is best used to communicate urgent information, or to spread news while they are still "hot". It is most frequently used for paging purposes.
- 4) Departmental Journals or Periodicals: A great deal of information about an organization, its policies, services and products can be disseminated in this manner. It must contain news of special importance to employees.
- 5) Annual Reports: This should be widely circulated. In compiling such reports the interests of workers are taken into consideration even though they are not the primary targets for annual reports.
- 6) Employee handbooks and pamphlets: Such publications are necessary and must be furnished new employees free or at small cost. They are also needed to explain lucidly and concisely employee rights and privileges and their duties and other obligations.
- Information Racks: Some organizations provide employees paper back literature and bulletins containing management techniques, the profit system, the state of the nation and other items that appeal to their interests.
- 8) The Grapevine: In order to combat the spread of false rumours, management should "feed, water, and cultivate the grapevine" by providing it factual information as frequently as possible.
- 9) The Employee Union: Management should make use of the union in communicating certain philosophies to employees. This is often more persuasive than direct communication.
- 10) Letters and Pay Inserts: Some special announcements are included in the pay envelopes given to employees where there is such a practice, otherwise such information are communication to employees by mail.

For effective and efficient upward communication, NULGE should ensure that the following channel or media of communication exist in the local government service:

- The Chain of Command: Theoretically, every information travels in a two-way process from the superior to
 the subordinate or vice versa. The superior should have an open door policy as well as the skills of an
 organization in order to encourage upward communication. Courageous superiors hold group meetings to
 encourage the expressions of gripes and attitudes that are often suppressed.
- 2) The Grievance Procedure: This is a fundamental device for upward communication. This gives the subordinate an opportunity to appeal beyond the authority of the immediate supervisor. The grievance procedure is made more effective when it is backed by a labour union.
- 3) The Complaint System: To supplement the grievance procedure, some organizations mount suggest boxes or "gripe boxes." Employees can experience some disappointments and have some suggestions for remedying the ills. Instead of confronting their superiors they can put the suggestions in a suggestion box. Another variation of the suggestion box is the gripe box into which employees drop written complaints or rumours, which they would like management to investigate.
- 4) The Grapevine: As a spontaneous and natural phenomenon, the grapevine provides the employees an emotional release; since management cannot suppress its development, it should always listen to it: as it

provides the necessary clues to the moods, feelings and attitudes of employees.

- 5) Moral Questionnaires: This process provides the employee an opportunity to express his views frankly when answering specific questions about the organization and its management.
- 6) Exit Interview: An exit interview gives an organization a good chance to discover the real reasons why an employee is quitting his job. Where such employees are reluctant to offer full and truthful information, follow-up questionnaires may be used.
- 7) Counselling: Often this is routinely provided but the authority barrier between the superior and the subordinate makes true communication difficult. Where open organization is resisted, management should designate some staff organization who would provide private and confidential organization to employees.
- 8) *Open-Door-Policy*: An open door policy facilitates upward communication. However, employees are afraid to by-pass their immediate supervisor to communicate their feelings, even if the opportunities are provided.
- 9) Labour Union: The labour union provides the primary channel for conveying to management, employees' feelings and demands. Collective bargaining provides a legal channel for upward communication.
- 10) Special Meetings: Some organizations schedule special meetings to discuss chosen policies or procedures. During such meetings, management gets immediate feedback from the employees.

Through effective and efficient downward and upward communications, as discussed above, NULGE could facilitate good employer-employee relationship in the local government service in Nigeria especially within the respective states and local government councils.

Finally, NULGE could promote good employer-employee relationship by being supportive of collective bargaining and labour relations. Collective bargaining is a process of negotiation between an organization (employer) and its employees (or their union) on employment terms and conditions of service and remuneration. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has defined collective bargaining as "negotiations about working conditions and terms of employers' organization on the one hand and one or more representative workers' organizations on the other, with a view of reaching an agreement" (ILO: Collective Bargaining, 1960).

Where an orderly and constructive leadership exists between employees and management/government officials, there is said to exist a state of industrial harmony.

Nigeria inherited from the British the traditional model of labour and industrial democracy and a free enterprise economy. In an industrial democracy the problems of employment, conditions of work, pay, security of employment and other related issues are settled within a framework of rules and regulations agreed upon by both management and the employees.

Nigeria Government policy has supported healthy industrial relations by encouraging collective bargaining in both the public and private sectors. Government's adherence to collective bargaining was motivated by its inherent advantages, some of which include:

- a) Free collective bargaining makes for industrial democracy by allowing disputes to be resolved by the parties directly without government intervention provided public interest was not jeopardized.
- b) Collective bargaining is economical compared with other methods of conflict management because its administrative apparatus is simple. Unlike industrial tribunals, industrial courts and wages boards or commissions which require a whole lot of officials and ancillary staff, collective bargaining depends mostly on internal staff and its cost is borne by workers and employers.
- c) It is relatively a more efficient means of regulating labour contracts since the parties directly involved are more familiar with the circumstances of the case than outsiders, be they conciliators or arbitrators.
- d) Collective bargaining obviates the problem confronting all administrative fixing of wages by resolving the conflict between the ability to pay by the employer and fairness to workers.
- e) It has the ability to achieve a fairer distribution of income between wages and profits than other methods can do.
- f) It makes for good industrial relations by stemming industrial discontent, disputes and unrest.

Good employer-employee relationship would be promoted by the NULGE if the union is strongly supportive of good collective bargaining and labour relations in the local government service.

5. Conclusion

Good employer-employee relationship makes for industrial peace and harmony. It creates peaceful and stable organizational climate, which is supportive of organizational growth and success.

The Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) is a very important trade union which oversees the

activities of the local government employees and relates with the state governments and other agencies that constitute the employers of its members. The concern of this paper had been how NULGE as a trade union could promote good employer-employee relationship in the local government service.

We examined this role of NULGE as a facilitator of good employer-employee relationship in Nigeria local government system and came to the conclusion that the union could play this important role effectively if they can evolve good strategies to do the followings:

- (i) Guarantee adequate positive motivation of workers
- (ii) Relate well with the political leadership in power
- (iii) Maintain effective communication between the employers and the employees
- (iv) Support good Collective Bargaining and labour relations within the service.

It is also advisable for the modern NULGE leadership not to assume that there is inherent hostility between management and labour. This assumption is no longer tenable or valid in the contemporary labour-management relations. The NULGE leadership should be proactive in her relations with the management and not reactive. In other words the leadership of NULGE in each state should extend a hand of friendship and comradeship to the state governor and the government of the state. They should attend state functions, interact with government officials and agencies; as well as send goodwill messages and letters of commendations where the government is trying her best to improve on the lives of the citizens.

The NULGE leadership should not only wait until there is delay in the payment of salaries, non-payment of salaries, non-promotion of staff, non-implementation of minimum wages and benefits, retrenchment of workers, increase in pump prices of petroleum products, etc. for their presence and relevance to be felt.

If it is only when there is a problem, dispute or hostility between the government (Employer) and the employers (members of the NULGE), is the only time the presence of NULGE as a trade union is felt by the public, the value and relevance of the organization as a facilitator of good employer-employee relationship will be highly reduced and unappreciated.

The NULGE as a union should therefore rise to the occasion and transform itself into an organization that will be known for promotion of good governance, industrial peace and democracy, responsible leadership and rural development.

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