
UNIT 4 ORGANISATIONAL MECHANISMS FOR SELF-RENEWAL

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

We have come to the last Unit of the course “Management of Distance Education”. From the previous blocks, you will have learnt a good deal about organisation and management of enterprises, how objectives are set, what strategies are adopted to achieve those objectives, how functions are organised and structured, what processes are developed and how the final outcomes are assessed in relation to the objectives with which it all started. Since management literature is so profusely enriched with business theories and practices, the foregoing discussions would have had a fair share of influence of the business metaphor. Be assured, however, that we are not talking about distance education as a “business” in the narrow commercial sense, but as a larger service that requires organisation and management that is closely parallel to business enterprises.

As in business, so in education. When the activity was initiated, we started with a set of assumptions about whom to teach, what to teach and how, as well as who would provide the resources for the initiative. Over a period of time, all these assumptions would have changed, some very marginally, and some very substantially. Since these assumptions are basic to the organisation’s existence and

survival, it is necessary that the objectives, strategies, structures and processes are all adjusted to the changing conditions. It is this process of adjustment that is often called the management of change.

Changes can occur in many different ways as we discussed in Unit-1 of this Block. There can be upheavals in the environment that can force organisations to change as socialist revolutions did to private enterprise. Competition could change business practices, forcing competitors to improve the quality of their products and services to stay in business, and sometimes even forcing mergers and amalgamations. New technologies could force several products out of the market as computers did to typewriters. How do organisations manage these changes? Some are overtaken by changes, while others anticipate changes and keep themselves always prepared to adjust to change. In this unit, we shall explore some of the ways in which distance education institutions manage changes and the mechanisms that they set up for the renewal of their organisations.

4.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- describe the essential attributes of a learning organisation;
- examine the instruments and processes which are necessary for a distance education institution to establish a knowledge base from its own experience;
- analyse how important it is for organisations to be proactive in responding to changes in the environment; and
- apply the mechanisms that should be in place within the institution to manage changes.

4.3 A LEARNING ORGANISATION

A distance education institution is essentially a teaching organisation. Quite simply, it cannot teach without learning. We are not however discussing here just the content of what it teaches, that requires continuous upgrading and revision but, more importantly, the strategies and the styles as well as the methods and the practices that require to be constantly watched, analysed and redesigned to meet a variety of changing situations. In order to be able to do it, the institution has to be continuously learning from its own experiences, by distilling that experience into knowledge, and applying that knowledge to emerging situations and uncertainties.

The basic attributes of a learning organisation are that it should:

- thrive on change
- encourage experimentation
- facilitate learning from the environment
- facilitate learning from employees
- reward learning.

Tom Peters said, “In a fast-paced, continually shifting environment, resistance to change is often the single most important fact that distinguishes those who succeed from those who fail”. In what follows we shall try to take a look at some of the attributes that distinguish organisations that learn from the successes of others in some detail.

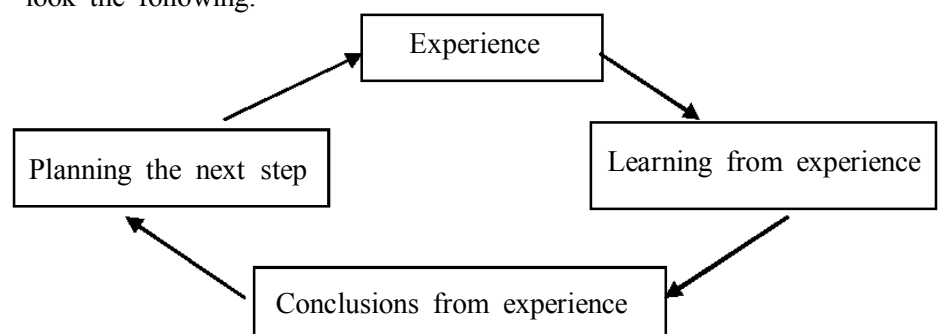
4.3.1 The Learning Paradigm

The world has become far too complex to discover any simplicity in it any more. Uncertainties created by environmental turbulence like competition, new discoveries, and changes in life styles are all contributing to the existing complexities constantly. It is no longer possible to visualise a coherent picture of the future in a long-term perspective. If the knowledge about the future is inadequate, it becomes still more difficult to control the consequences that would flow in the long-term. If these consequences remain completely out of control, one can only imagine the anxiety and the tension that any organisation is likely to experience about its own survival.

Organisations however do not resign themselves to these tensions and anxieties. They engage themselves in sustained questioning, developing new perspectives, searching alternatives, and doing things differently. This exercise will involve re-examination of the basic assumptions on which the current operations were launched, and modify them where necessary, to establish the correct relationship between the organisation and its environment. In order to be able to engage meaningfully in such an exercise, organisations have to consciously cultivate a learning environment within them. In other words, a learning organisation is one in which the set of philosophy, principles and values that inform its people in shaping their attitudes and behaviour to the attainment of its goals is firmly based on their own collective knowledge and wisdom.

The major characteristics of a learning organisation are:

- It thrives on change. Change, as we said earlier, is essentially the willingness to adapt oneself to new ideas, new environments, new processes and new cultures. In order to change, an organisation needs to consider knowledge and learning as well as creativity and innovation as its key resources. Such an organisation would be constantly reframing its goals, looking at problems from different angles, or developing new skills. It can never be static; people in the organisation should continuously adapt to changing circumstances.
- It should encourage its people to engage themselves in problem solving, innovation and experimentation. Experimentation is the key concept behind a learning organisation. There is risk in giving employees the opportunities and responsibilities for experimenting, and it might turn out to be costly. But it is a risk necessary and worth taking without which innovations, the key to change, are not possible.
- Communication of success and failures: Organisations should have systems in place for creation, acquisition and transfer of new knowledge and also for modifications in its behaviour and attitudes reflecting the changes in knowledge and its applications. It is just as important to learn mistakes as it is to celebrate success. The learning cycle in an organisation should be based on regular feedback and assessment of its experience. The cycle would look the following:



- It should facilitate learning from the environment. A learning organisation should keep itself abreast of the happenings in its internal and external environment. Technical and political developments that might impact on the organisation's current and future plans and strategies should be identified and monitored. Internal sources of information could be work teams, departments and affiliated organisations; external sources might comprise consultants, customers and clients or other organisations in the same field. Efficient dissemination of information that can be easily accessed by everyone in the organisation is an important component of the learning process.

No organisation can absorb changes without learning new and better ways of doing, working and organising. It is only through these efforts that new products and processes as well as new techniques and methods are developed; it is these efforts that contribute to improvements in efficiency and productivity; and the success or failure of these efforts will ultimately depend upon the knowledge resource that an organisation creates for itself.

In the field of education, the imperatives of innovation and experimentation are more critical in distance education. After all, the emergence of distance education itself owes much to the innovations of educational planners and managers, and when once it came to be established, the providers of distance education are facing stiff competition both from local as well as global providers. The traditional system itself is absorbing many of the methods and practices of distance education and it would be no exaggeration to say that the 21st century will be witness to a major turmoil in the field of education, with respect to its functions and also the ways in which it functions.

Educational planners and managers cannot remain oblivious of these developments. Another significant consequence of this development would be that no single provider will be able to meet all the learning needs in a given society or territory. Learners will have to approach several institutions to satisfy their needs. A proactive education system will anticipate these changing patterns of learner needs and prepare itself with the creation of collaborative and networked learning environments rather than letting their potential learner groups scout for information and facilities.

4.3.2 Education-Environment Relationship

Earlier in this course, we have had occasion to look at the many factors in the environment that have an influence on the planning and management of the distance education system at the macro level, or distance teaching institution at the micro level. While examining these factors, we had talked about the changing demographic profile of learners with respect to their age, gender, occupation, income levels, place of occupation, etc. At another level, we also considered the varying needs to be met: the need for widening access to promote social justice, promotion of equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education, improving productivity through skill development and technology upgradation, induction of new technologies, etc.

With the emergence of new learner groups, and new learning needs, new learning styles and preferences also emerge which require different pedagogic methods and techniques as well. The potential of new communication technologies provides both a challenge and an opportunity to the instructional system designers. Educational providers cannot get away from these realities.

Still more complex is the challenge that education systems across the world are facing today, the challenge of diminishing resources. This is assuming almost the proportions of a threat. Governments are finding it increasingly difficult to provide all the resources that education systems need; within the education system itself there are competing claims as in the case of primary education against higher education; and when funds are somehow mobilised, there are problems of putting

together the intellectual resources required for teaching. As a consequence, educational resource mobilisation, which has traditionally been a responsibility of the governments is progressively getting diversified, and with several private providers entering the 'market', the methods of organisation and management of education are also changing significantly.

Yet another, and perhaps more serious, challenge that educational providers today have to confront is the problems arising from the globalisation of education. We had discussed the many facets of globalisation of education in Block-3. The most significant among these is the growing competition. Educational institutions today have to compete with not just domestic providers, but, on an increasing scale, with cross-national providers as well. While global providers help widen access, arguably there are also commercial interests at play. There are instances of cross-border providers of education exploiting the markets in the developing countries where good quality education is in short supply, and the demand for places is very high. Governments and educational institutions have to insulate their domestic systems from this exploitative environment; ensure that cross-border education is regulated, its quality and credibility are assured and that the health of the domestic systems is not endangered.

These environmental challenges will have a decisive impact on education. As we have said earlier, education cannot afford to be overtaken by these changes. It has to anticipate, and prepare for the change. It is in this preparation that the qualities of a learning organisation will be severely tested. How do the educational institutions prepare for this change? We mentioned in the previous section that, when the future is uncertain, in fact, when there are no ways of knowing the future with any degree of accuracy, it is not possible for an institution to put in place structures and processes, or systems and procedures that can control future events. In cases like this, it is only the knowledge and experience gained from the working of the institution itself that can be of any help. It is imperative, therefore, that systems and procedures are established by organisations to internalise their experience, convert it into knowledge and share it widely within the institution.

How does a distance education institution go about this task? A checklist of items that could have an impact on the relationship between the institution and its environment is given below:

- The demographic profile of the students enrolled
- The demographic profile of potential students by analysing the backgrounds and nature of enquiries of those who seek information about courses and facilities, etc.
- The proportion of learners from the assumed target groups who have actually enrolled
- The patterns of retention and drop-outs
- The changes, if any, in the occupational patterns and levels of the alumni
- Training and retraining needs for new job markets
- Emerging skill development needs for the introduction of new technologies
- Patterns of resource allocation for education
- Globalisation and competition in education
- Strengths and weaknesses in the existing system in facing new challenges
- Availability of competent personnel (teaching and professional)
- Directions of national economic development.

What we have mentioned above are only illustrative indications. The important point to be emphasised here is that a distance education institution, if it has proactively to manage environmental changes, should have in place a system that will constantly monitor all relevant information (internal as well as external) and evaluate the impact that any change in its current assumptions that govern its operations will have on its future. It will then have prepared itself in substantial measure to respond to any change and manage it well.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

a) What is a learning organization? Write two important characteristics of such an organisation? (Answer in about 50 words)

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b) How environmental changes affect education and what preparations are required by educational institutions to face these changes? (Answer in about 50 words)

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4.3.3 Search for Alternatives

It is an established fact that success often depends upon doing things differently. It is a natural tendency to follow the beaten track – it is safe, there is no risk, and in any case, everyone else is doing it. In traditional education, based entirely on class-room centred, face-to-face interaction, the methods remain substantially the same; there can only be marginal or incremental changes. Teaching aids may be used to supplement oral transmission, but they do not substitute class-room instruction. Slides, charts, graphs or audio and video tapes may be used to support teachers’ efforts at communication; the teacher still remains centre-stage. But not so in distance education.

In distance education, there is a significant substitution of the traditional role of the teacher. Face-to-face interaction, if at all, is limited and takes place at different locations and with different sets of teachers for the same course. This substitution factor offers several alternatives to choose from. For instance, a large number of part-time tutors recruited locally at the study centres can offer tutorials to students registered on the same course. Alternatively, a single teacher at a central location can reach all students at several locations, synchronously or asynchronously, through the medium of one or more communication technology devices. Satellite-based communication technologies offer opportunities for establishing virtual class-rooms at various locations using multimedia transmission facilities. Interactive videos and Internet chats have now become very common. What method is eventually used is a judgment of the management depending upon its own assessment of the effectiveness of the medium, its accessibility and availability to learners, its cost and also its appropriateness to the environment. Whatever the initial choice, with improvements in technologies and their applications, the management has to

engage itself in continuously looking for more effective alternatives if it has to satisfy the remote learners.

A distance education institution has several other important functions to perform; the production and distribution of learning materials being the most important among them. In this case also, there are several options available to the management. These are:

- in-house production
- outsourcing all production functions
- just-in-time production
- large scale production and warehousing
- contracting out all distribution functions
- centralised distribution
- decentralised production and distribution.

The choices are many. But the issue is how the management chooses one method or another or a combination of methods?

We have referred earlier to the significance of the Management Information System (MIS) in the context of the issues in planning and management of distance education institutions. It is the effectiveness of the MIS that will ultimately provide the feedback on the performance of current operations, their costs, their strengths and weaknesses, and also the opportunities that new methods will offer.

4.3.4 Collective Wisdom in Problem Solving

Organisations routinely handle large volumes of information. A distance education institution has to deal with a mass of information on all aspects of its functioning. It has to collect, collate and analyse demographic data to assess the potential market for its programmes; it has to survey and analyse trends in economic and industrial development and analyse the employment data to estimate the needs of various employment sectors and assess the existing and emerging manpower needs; it has to assess the training and retraining needs of the industry in terms of levels and professional/technical/vocational categories; it has to evaluate the response to programmes on offer from students, employers, the professions, and so on; it has also, almost regularly, to monitor information on technologies and their applications, new and emerging thrusts in social and economic development, public policies, and the like. There is a bewildering variety of sources from which a dynamic institution meets its information needs. This information duly processed and stored is a critical component of the knowledge base of the institution.

An institution does not create knowledge just for accumulation only. It applies that knowledge in its operations which in turn generates new experience. From a critical analysis of this experience, it draws lessons. In other words, knowledge is also a structured form of distilled experience. This knowledge is purely internal, and owned entirely by the institution.

At this stage, it is important to remember that an organisation or institution is essentially the people who comprise that organisation or institution. Knowledge that any institution owns is, therefore, the knowledge of its people. It is not enough to accumulate knowledge and own it; what is made of that knowledge, and how, is still of greater importance. It is the application of its knowledge by an institution in solving its problems that makes for wisdom. This is a crucial process in a learning organisation – distilling knowledge from information and experience and applying that knowledge to make wise choices.

We had mentioned earlier in this section that organisational survival depends in a large measure on the processes for free flow and sharing of information among the people within the organisation, and the systems and procedures that are in place to enable them to participate effectively in its management. It is this approach that makes for the strength of an institution - drawing upon its collective wisdom in problem-solving and decision-making.

Check Your Progress 2

Identify the following statements as True 'T' or False 'F' and mention against each statement.

Note: Compare your answer with the one given at the end of the Unit.

- a) In traditional education teacher still remains at centre-stage. ()
- b) Satellite-based communication technologies offer opportunities for establishing virtual class-rooms at various locations using multimedia transmission facilities. ()
- c) In order to be effective, the MIS need not provide feedback constantly on the performance of current operations. ()
- d) An organisation or institution is essentially the people who comprise that organisation or institution. ()

4.4 HOW DO ORGANISATIONS LEARN?

We have just said that any organisation is a collective of its people. This collective is not however a loose conglomeration of disparate elements; it is nearly always structured formally around sets of coherent functions that help the organisation achieve its goals. In structuring an organisation, generally, functions are defined, roles are specified and boundaries are demarcated. This structure makes most organisations reflect varying degrees of complexity depending upon the extent of interdependence of functional units, most of which often perform their roles as though each one of them is autonomous of the rest. Even when roles are defined and jobs are specified, there is a natural tendency among people to look at their roles and tasks independently, and not from the perspective of the organisation as a whole. Since functionally, most of them occupy the same levels in the hierarchy of the organisation, coordination of their performance becomes essential. It is this horizontal coordination of performance that turns out to be a serious challenge to the management of many organisations.

Several organisations establish mechanisms, formally or informally, to ensure this coordination. Whatever forms this mechanism takes, it is an important element in the organisation's structure. The essential purpose of this instrument is to encourage Unit Heads to consider their individual problems and challenges as those of the organisation as a whole, and to bring to bear on the search for their solutions the entire knowledge and wisdom of the organisation. In order to foster and develop such a culture, it is necessary that organisations foster a climate of respect and concern for persons with established reputation of performance, and from whom there are high expectations. Wide dissemination of information throughout the system especially at the horizontal levels promotes equality of relationships and facilitates informal interaction in facing problems and challenges.

4.4.1 Problem-solving Approach and Mechanisms

A distance education institution could face a variety of problems both in its current operations as well as in its future tasks. For instance, the enrolment could be much below or above the expected levels, there could be failures in the production and distribution systems, and there could be challenges from other providers.

We discussed earlier in this course the organisational structure of a distance education institution and the issues in its planning and management. In that discussion, we considered at some length, the roles and functions of the units in charge of planning and development, internal coordination, and the management information system. All these three centres are crucial to the institution's knowledge resource base. They create knowledge, disseminate it and in solving current problems, they can also transfer this knowledge to any other operational centre. In other words, these centres should help create an atmosphere in which any problem or challenge is perceived within the organisation as something that the whole organisation has to grapple with, and in so doing, the unit immediately concerned with the issue should feel that it has the backing of the whole organisation in addressing it.

It is this approach to problem-solving that we discussed earlier in this section as the application of collective wisdom in addressing any issue. It has however to be admitted that this approach is not something that can be taken for granted; it has to be cultivated and practised. It is only then that a sense of participation would develop and through it, the more essential commitment of all concerned to the survival and growth of the institution. At the core of this approach is willingness to share information, frequent exchange of views and experience, and above all, mutual respect and collegiality, among all functionaries who constitute the system.

4.4.2 Integrating Internal Knowledge and Experience with Functions

In the discussion on the organisation and structure of a distance education institution, we had occasion to explain that it consists of three major systems, namely, course development and production, delivery of programmes and services, and organisation and management. We had also seen that each of these major systems has several sub-systems, each of which with a set of specific functions devolving on it. The initial design of the structure of a distance education institution will necessarily be based on our knowledge of the ways in which institutions elsewhere are functioning. As the new institution's operations get under way, it begins to generate experience. It has to be remembered that the objectives of a distance education institution, the ways of its working and the attitudes and behaviour of the public including those in authority as well as the potential learners, are all conditioned significantly by its environment. It follows therefore that a distance education institution has to be constantly alive to its environment and should be willing to look at its own functions, processes and practices with a view to improve them and make them effective and relevant.

There are many ways in which an institution can obtain this feedback from the environment. We had discussed in the previous Blocks the usefulness of systems for evaluation of programmes as well as institutional performance. We had also explained the need for surveys and studies about the acceptability of the graduates in the job market, the employers' attitude towards the qualifications awarded by the institution, and the response from other institutions to its efforts at resource mobilisation, and so on. You will be wondering why all these issues which were already discussed at some length are again and again brought back into focus. The answer is simple. We discussed these issues earlier in the context of

functionality of current operations; we are now referring to them in the context of the needs of the future. Perhaps, what we set out at the beginning may have delivered; perhaps, they may not have. Whatever the outcome, do we persist with these structures and processes? Or, do we look at them again in the context of contemporary needs and future changes in direction? Yes, a dynamic organisation needs to do it. That is how a learning organisation conceives the initial design of its structures so that knowledge and experience gained from its current operations can be drawn upon to modify and improve its future activities.

To refresh your memory, we may recall a few instances we discussed earlier that would illustrate how experience can inform the desirability or otherwise of systemic changes. Here are a few examples:

- Centralisation or decentralisation of certain operations like admission of students or distribution of materials;
- Combining coherent functions like admission with student record management or maintenance of assignment evaluation records with examination records, even though they were separately organised initially;
- Setting up appropriate mechanisms to deal with emerging issues like quality control, cost analysis, evaluation research, and so on.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

How does the problem-solving approach work in a Distance Education institution? (Answer in about 50 words)

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4.4.3 Induction or Development of New Technologies

There is no getting away from the fact that information and communication technologies are integral to distance learning systems. Since developments in these fields are taking place at a breathtaking speed, no system can at any given point of time, feel confident and secure that it has inducted the most modern technologies into its operations. The technologies used are not ends in themselves, but there is no denying the fact that distance education is driven by technologies. They are used to augment opportunities and widen access; they can make learning more efficient and flexible; they can also enrich the learning experience.

A large variety of technologies, of varying degrees and levels of sophistication is now available and are used in distance education in the developed and developing countries. We have already discussed the concerns that would influence the choice of any one or more technologies in a given environment. The point is that in a rapidly changing technology environment, the choice once made does not stay for all times to come. In the induction of new technologies, or in moving from a lower level of sophistication to higher levels, the management has to be guided by two important considerations. First, it has to settle for those technologies that are compatible with the environment in terms of availability, accessibility, cost and user friendliness. Secondly, the management has also to anticipate and prepare

the environment for absorption of new technologies. In this latter case, the distance education institutions are also functioning as change agents for technology induction and upgrading to meet the future needs.

It is not surprising that in today's world, highly successful distance education systems are also managing very specialised communication networks. They are developing and using many varieties of interactive software to enhance the effectiveness of the teaching-learning environment. The management of any distance learning system has to be alert about these developments and should be constantly endeavouring to develop or acquire new technologies for its survival.

4.4.4 Innovations and Experiments

The primary focus of a distance education institution is the creation of an effective learning environment. The development of such an environment is the function of several factors ranging from institutional policies on programmes and their delivery, students and personnel, to the methods and practices in the delivery of various services. Unlike the established class-room based education, distance learning is still an evolving system and there is no single approach or strategy that makes learning effective for distance learners. As we have seen earlier, distance learning programmes have their own unique characteristics, the most important among them being flexibility in structures, processes, methods and practices. It is this flexibility that permits a distance education institution to innovate and experiment continuously.

Innovations and experiments do not take place in an environment devoid of initiative and risk-taking. Innovation is not a chance happening; it is a continuous process consciously sustained. We demand new technology, new ideas, and we want change. But seldom do we realise that change also destroys the stable state. Innovation leads to changes in the attitudes of people, and their value systems. From this point, we fear innovation, and discourage it. Innovation involves uncertainties and risks. It is not an orderly, risk-reducing process. Nevertheless, a dynamic management process can still anticipate the uncertainties and convert them into manageable risks. This is a fundamental issue in the management of innovation.

It would be appropriate at this stage to look at some factors that might still inhibit innovations in distance education. The education system is still conditioned in a substantial measure by the standards and values that tradition has shaped over centuries. It is not surprising therefore, that at every stage of its evolution and almost in every activity and process, there is a preoccupation with parallels in the conventional system which, more often than not, tends to hold back initiative and enterprise from distance education.

Preparing people for an innovative enterprise is not an easy task. Innovation often exposes the inadequacy of established professional authority. It demands that all participants in the innovation process learn a great deal more than what they already know. This learning always cuts across the immediate professional concerns of the personnel involved. This process demands that each participant give up his/her stereo-typed view, and become willing to listen to each other. Sometimes this could lead to mutual frustration. This can be avoided only if all of them are willing to test openly the nature and appropriateness of the assumptions that they have of themselves, and of each other, against an equally open examination of what innovation demands from them. This is the essence of a truly innovative process. It is through such interaction among the participants in an innovative endeavour that they can jointly discover themselves, and their potential for effective collaboration and team work which indeed is one of the core competencies of a distance education institution.

4.4.5 Monitoring the Environment

In the section on education-environment relationship (4.3.2), we discussed at some length several environmental factors that can influence the functions and working of a distance education institution. While discussing these factors, we have also drawn attention to the need for constantly monitoring these factors in order to be able to proactively respond to emerging change in the environment. Without again going over these factors, we pause for a brief moment here to look at the instruments and mechanisms that should be in place for this activity.

As we mentioned earlier, a distance education institution interacts with the environment in many different ways. Its own structures, as we noted earlier, make provision for involvement of external experts in the consideration and decision on several issues of policy, programmes, strategies, and so on. This is a valuable source to feel the environment. The interface with governments is another major opportunity to assess the environmental factors that could have an impact on the institution. These might be reflected, for example, on the funding pattern or making greater provision for education and training in specific sectors. For instance, if the government policies envisage a major expansion in school education, the institution should be ready to augment its facilities for teacher training, if such facilities are already available, or create them quickly if they do not exist.

In the best of times, it is not an easy task to assess the future needs for education and training in any society. The complexity of factors involved in the exercise is indeed bewildering. Nevertheless, there are trends and indicators available from a variety of sources. If these can be monitored systematically and fed into the system, considerable spadework would have been done to prepare the institution to take on new and additional responsibilities in education and training at relatively short notice. Some suggestions follow:

- It is now common for most governments to prepare long-term perspective plans for economic development. A forward-looking distance education institution would be critically looking at these perspective plans to identify the major growth areas, the order of magnitude of expected growth, the existing employment pattern in the concerned sectors, the projected need for additional human resources to meet those needs, etc.
- Once the areas and their training needs are known, it should be possible to break them up into different branches of specialisation and the infrastructure required to organise them. This is a major exercise that institutions should continuously be engaged in.
- Globalisation and competition are major environmental influences on distance education. Communication technologies provide access to anybody anywhere in the world to any institution anywhere. Logically, therefore, the best institutions can force the bad and the poor ones out of the 'market'. It is therefore, necessary for every institution to develop certain core competencies and a competitive edge in terms of quality, relevance, or any other parameter, if it has to survive.
- 'Collaboration and networking' is going to be the new paradigm of educational provision. A forward-looking institution should be able to transform competition into collaboration and cooperation by consolidating its areas of strength and striving for excellence in its own core competence.

This list can be long. But the question that remains is who in the institution should be doing all this. That is why distance education institutions, unlike the traditional universities, emphasise planning and development and create structures within its organisational set up for performing the development function.

Check Your Progress 4

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

Innovation and experimentation is unavoidable in Distance Education institutions – why? (Answer in about 50 words)

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4.5 ORGANISATIONAL RENEWAL

These days we hear a great deal about management theories and practices. Classical theories of management are all being rewritten. Management literature is replete with new jargons; downsizing, outsourcing, process reengineering, core competencies, system integration, value addition, globalisation, the list is endless. What do all these signify? *Change*, in one word. When rapid changes are taking place around you, you cannot stand still and watch helplessly. You have to adjust to the changes, reposition yourself at some point of advantage so that you are not overtaken by changes. It is this process of adjustment, the transformation of an adversity into an advantage, that management of change is all about.

You cannot change and still remain the same. Every change signifies something new, something that was not there in the first place. You might have started doing things differently, you might have shed some flab, you might have integrated several operations or decentralised some. What you do, and how you do it, will depend upon your perception about your strengths and weaknesses, and about the opportunities and threats that any change in the environment might offer. It is this process of assessing the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats that Management Science calls the SWOT analysis, an essential tool for management of change and organisational renewal.

4.5.1 Building Core Competence

Core competence as a concept was first used by Prahalad and Hawel in their article “The Core Competence of the Organisation” in the Harvard Business Review (May-June 1990). While this article identified core competence as knowledge of one or more technologies, and the concept has been widely in use since then, a precise definition of core competence has remained elusive. It has been argued that core competence is always discovered retrospectively, and is no more than a description of the success or failure of an experiment. In an article “Is your Core Competence a Mirage?” in the McKinsey Quarterly in February, 1997, Coyne, Stephen Hall and Patricia Gorman Clifford proposed the following definition “a core competence is a combination of complementary skills and knowledge bases embedded in a group or team that results in the ability to execute one or more critical processes to a world-class standard”. According to them, core competences are of two kinds:

- Insight/foresight competences that enable an organisation to discover or learn facts or patterns that create first-mover advantage. These include technical or scientific knowledge that produces inventions; proprietary data like

behavioural patterns and credit-standing, knowledge about organisations/ individuals; creative flair in inventing successful products; superior ability for analysis and inference, etc.

- Frontline execution competences arising from the quality of an end product or service according to the activities of the frontline personnel. This competence is the unique ability to deliver products and services that are consistently near the quality of the best products and services available in the market.

How do we assess core competences? The article proposes four key questions. These are:

- Are our skills truly superior?
- How sustainable is the superiority?
- How much value can the competence generate in comparison to other economic levers?
- Is the competence integral to the organisation's value proposition?

Hopefully, most successful organisations have some positive response to each of these questions. If the answers are negative, they would have to focus on building their core competences for survival.

What is the core competence in distance education? Open and distance education has slowly, but surely, emerged as a strategic means in the provision of education and training. New communication technologies are providing more effective tools to governments, educational institutions, business establishments and other public and private agencies to reach out to large numbers at relatively lower costs. In this new environment, the real challenge before the management of education is going to be the development of a new pedagogy for technology-mediated learning and teaching.

In an earlier Unit in Block-3, we discussed some of the competencies to be developed in distance educators in the context of the staff development needs. We had listed several areas in which it is necessary to get the staff trained. This list is long and possibly, no single institution can develop all the competence in all the areas. A little proficiency in most of them will be adequate enough to get an institution started. But, in the long-term, as institutions face new challenges of several kinds, posed by new technologies, competition, new needs to be met, or new resources to be mobilised, they will necessarily have to do a SWOT analysis and concentrate more on their strengths and develop competencies that can seize the new opportunities and convert them to their advantage.

A key area of competence that distance education has to develop is the creation of a distance learning environment. It involves the integration of open and distance education technologies with the learning environment of the actual and potential learners. Creation of this environment depends on several factors:

- the technological means currently available to the institution and the levels of their sophistication;
- the scope for technology upgradation including the availability of both hardware and software for such upgradation;
- the accessibility of the technology and its user-friendliness;
- professional competence in designing instructional systems using the available technologies, keeping also in view the styles and preferences of learners, the need for interaction and access to learning resources;

- networking the resources for design, development and delivery of programmes and services.

Distance education institutions cannot afford to ignore these areas of competence in the future. Strengthening these areas continuously is a pre-requisite for their survival. We hope that a better understanding of core competences in distance education that we described in this section will enable you to focus on strengthening them.

4.5.2 Motivating and Encouraging People to Work with New Models

We have already discussed the significance of innovation and experimentation as a tool for organisational learning and knowledge creation. However, it has to be emphasised that innovations do not happen by chances or in a vacuum; organisations have to make innovations happen. In the final analysis, it will depend on what value the organisation as a whole attaches to its people innovating on the processes, products and services. Motivating and encouraging people to work with new models are crucial to promoting innovation. Involving people in brainstorming, collectively thinking through issues and problems as they arise, helping people to continuously think and clarify their vision about their roles vis-a-vis the vision of the institution, making them analyse their mental models by presenting them to others so that they become more open to be influenced by their peer groups, are some of the means that could motivate people to experiment with new ideas and concepts. However, it has to be borne in mind that there is no single magic formula that can bring about innovations.

Most organisations, at one time or another, would be facing problems. The larger picture that these problems pose is reflected in falling profits, declining market share, losing subscribers in the telecom business, for example, or passengers in the airlines industry and declining enrolments in institutions of education. The evidence is irrefutable, but those in the organisations would seldom admit that there was anything wrong with the performance of the roles assigned to each of them. They would argue that each of them is doing his/her best; that perhaps, something has gone wrong with the infrastructure; that more equipment and facilities needed to be added; and very often, that other departments or units did not play their role. Everyone would accept that there is a problem, but would insist that it is not in their domain. It would be hard in such cases to transform the organisation if attention is devoted only to fix some hardware here or modify a system there. It is in situations like these that motivating employees and encouraging them to work differently assume importance. While employees assume that they are focused on their work, it is important to drive the point home that customer satisfaction is the key to success in any enterprise. For instance, a telephone subscriber would not be interested so much in the state-of-the-art nature of the equipment his/her company boasts of as near zero call drop rates; or airline passengers would not feel excited about the high-tech hardware used by the airline if his/her flying experience is unsatisfactory.

As we said, people in most organisations do not want to talk about themselves; it is a blame game that goes on all the time. Successful leadership is about getting people hold the mirror before themselves and asking how you as a leader are going to address the problem; how you are going to be seen as the person who always takes good decisions, always delivers, and shows progress. Indeed, it is a question of organisational culture, and it does not change or evolve in the short run. But, in the end, organisational transformation is more about changing the culture of the organisation. And the key to that process of transformation is motivating people to look at themselves and reflect on what changes in their attitudes, values and behaviour are necessary, and encouraging them to focus on small, but real improvements in their performance that will all add up.

Distance education itself is the outcome of innovations in class-room teaching that was traditionally the only system of education. If education is conceived as the outcome of interactive teaching-learning processes, distance education is another method of the same process. The principal difference is that the class room is substituted with a complex system that involves many players who play different roles. It is possible to visualise a continuing evolution of this system and infinite variations of its processes as new technologies become available, and new models of collaboration and networking become possible. To the extent an institution creates conditions in which its people can experiment with new and different ways by varying the processes, with their feet deeply rooted in their environment, we are likely to see much greater creativity and innovativeness in distance education technologies.

4.5.3 Information Technology Applications

You will notice that in this section, and perhaps all through this unit, there is a great deal of repetition of what has already been discussed. This is inevitable because we have exhaustively discussed management theories and practices in distance education in different contexts and perspectives. What we are now doing is to look at them again from the point of view of rethinking strategies, restructuring organisational models, reassessing the achievements and reformulating goals to achieve the institution's mission.

It is not necessary to go over the crucial role that information plays in this exercise. Enough has been said already in this unit as well as in the previous blocks on the role of information in the larger context of planning and management. Suffice it to say here that there can be no review, no revision, and no renewal unless the people in the institution know what is being reviewed, revised and renewed. If this has to be carried out as an informal exercise, all the participants in the process should have the relevant information and to make that possible, the MIS should be effectively organised within the organisation.

Decades of use of Information Technology across business, industry and education have still not made it an integral tool for driving good performance in most organisations. For instance, the link between spending and performance is not clear, if not problematic, for most organisations. It is still not uncommon to see organisations hiring a high-profile CIO (Chief Information Officer), invest huge amounts of money on IT infrastructure and sit back hoping for the best.

In most cases, IT began as a support function, leading to one-dimensional management approach. However, technology-enabled products, interactive communications and an "always on" information environment have brought IT centre stage with critical implications for business growth and customer engagement. Further, IT applications in management processes like thin and lean management techniques have brought down cost, reduced waste and improved productivity. IT now plays two distinct categories of roles in management: first, applying lessons from the production processes, namely, distribution, standardisation and simplification that drive efficiency, optimise delivery and lower unit costs, and second, helping organisations respond more effectively to changing needs and gain a competitive advantage through promoting innovation and growth.

This approach goes beyond just relabeling functions and includes broader areas of leadership, governance and organisational changes. Organisation leaders have to engage with IT in new ways. For example, IT standardisation and consolidation increase responsiveness and cost effectiveness. And, IT will help support innovation with skills to deliver IT-enabled capabilities and services quickly spurring growth (Roger Roberts, Hugo Sarrazin and Johnson Sikes: Reshaping IT Management for Turbulent Times; McKinsey Quarterly, December 2010).

Distance education systems, as we have said all along, require IT more as a partner than a mere tool. As distance education products and services are getting more and more IT-enabled (interactive communication, Internet-based instruction, satellite-delivered live video-conferencing, etc.), IT has become the key to the future of distance education.

4.5.4 Team Building

Most organisations work in teams, especially at the top levels. In many cases, however, top management teams do not work as well as they could. A dysfunctional team at the top can slow down, derail or even paralyse the functioning of the organisation. Research surveys and case studies identify three important steps for setting up top executive level teams. These are:

- It is the Chief Executive's responsibility to determine the membership of the team. The key to getting the composition right is in deciding what contributions the team as a whole, and its members as individuals, must make to achieve the organisation's performance aspirations. Periodic review of the team's performance, and reconstitution of the team when necessary are essential to ensure cohesiveness and a sense of purpose among the members of a team
- The tasks assigned to each team should be only those that they can do. In other words, the purpose and focus of each top team should be those areas of work that benefit from the top team perspective. For instance, clear distinction should be made between work the teams should do themselves and those that they should merely monitor. Getting involved in the supervisory responsibilities of individual managers can only create dysfunctionalities in the organisational processes.
- Team dynamics and processes are just as important. Top teams should ensure "productive collaboration" among its members. There could be opposing views in addressing particular challenges; there could be external interventions like changes in government policy that could unsettle an organisation's existing primacy; there could be new competitors. In addressing these challenges, top teams should move with a sense of direction and accountability. Correcting dysfunctional dynamics requires focused attention and interventions.

Distance education as an activity is essentially a team effort. We have seen from the previous Blocks that almost at every stage of design, development and delivery, it is the function of teams of people – academics, professionals, managers and administrators – that makes distance education the dynamic system that it is. At this stage, it has to be remembered that traditionally education is a one person effort of the teacher. Not surprisingly, teachers do not work in teams; perhaps they may not even have much respect for team-work either. It is against this background that one has to consider the importance of team-building in distance education.

Academics have to play a major role in distance education, but they have to do it in conjunction with a large number of others from professional, techno-managerial and administrative fields. Building cohesive and purposeful teams of people drawn from different fields of competence is by no means an easy task in the best of times. Training and orientation can play some part in this respect. But ultimately it is the working ethos of the institution, the totality of its philosophy, principles and values, and the environment in which it functions that will determine an institution's team building potential.

4.5.5 Systemic Thinking

A system is an entity which maintains its existence and functioning as a whole for some purpose through the mutual interaction of its parts. Systems thinking

is your ability to do things as a whole (or holistically) including the many different types of relationships between the many elements in a complex system. “Systems thinking is a sensibility – for the subtle interconnectedness that gives living systems their unique character” (Peter Senge: The Fifth Discipline; The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation: 1990). The purpose of systems thinking is to manage the rapidly growing complexity of today’s worlds of business and technology. It focuses on the whole, not on its parts, and concentrates on the interfaces and boundaries of components, on their connections and arrangement, on the potentials of holistic systems, to achieve results that are greater than the sum of its parts (Howard Smith and Peter Fingar: Business Process Management: The Third Wave; 2002).

We have said at several places in this course that distance education is a complex and large system, comprising several major sub-systems each of which has many components and constituents. Any effort at piece-meal changes in distance education methods has therefore, to be avoided. The consequences of a minor change in one part of the system can have serious consequences for other parts; they can lead to dislocation of schedules, delays in output flows, and dysfunctionality of processes. It is therefore, imperative that planners and managers of distance education systems think through all consequences that any change can lead to a complex and independent system of several variables.

It has to be reemphasised that management of a distance education system is not about applying a set of rigid theories on education; it is more about continuously evolving good practices that can offer the right solutions to problems and situations as they arise. It is therefore, of great significance that ‘good practices’ are documented and shared with several institutions so that in course of time a body of knowledge gets developed which can be drawn upon by distance education practitioners especially in the less developed, and the developing countries. The role played by International Organisations and agencies like the International Council of Distance Education (ICDE), The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and several Distance Education Associations and Institutions in many countries in organising international conferences to exchange views and experience is of great value in this context.

Check Your Progress 5

Note: i) Space is given below for your answer.

ii) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

What are the major components that are to be addressed in bringing about change/organisational renewal in DE institutions? (Answer in about 50 words.)

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4.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit completes the course on “Management of Distance Education’. As we have pointed out repeatedly in this course, the emergence of distance education is a stage in the evolution of the contemporary education system. This process of evolution signified continuous assimilation of changes in what exists, shedding

some elements while absorbing others. This process, in the final analysis, is the function of changes which become inevitable due to several reasons. We thought it worthwhile to bring together the issues and concerns associated with changes in education and their management. The relevance of this theme for distance education is significant, as in a short span of about six decades we have seen spectacular changes in the methods and styles of distance education. Contrast this to the ever slow process of change in the traditional university education system that has now a history of over twelve centuries. It is in this context that we thought it useful to discuss the theme of change in education as a management concern even if the discussion turned out to be too theoretical. We have tried however to bring the focus back on distance education in this last unit while considering the methods and practices that distance education institutions follow in attempting organisational restructuring and renewal.

We hope that you would have found this discussion interesting and useful.

4.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

- a) A learning organisation is one which continuously questions its existing practices, develops new perspectives, searches for alternatives and tries to do things differently, to face new challenges and to adjust itself to changing conditions.

The two characteristics of a learning organisation are:

- (i) It considers knowledge, learning, creativity and innovation as key resources
 - (ii) Follows a holistic approach which integrates problem solving, innovation and experimentation.
- b) Environmental changes consist of changing demographic profile of learners, need for widening access for promotion of social justice and equal opportunities, improving productivity. These changes force educational institutions to anticipate new challenges, and prepare themselves to face and solve them with the help of knowledge and experience gained from the working of the institution.

Check Your Progress 2

- (a) T (b) T (c) F (d) T

Check Your Progress 3

In a distance education institution, there are certain critical organisational units like planning and development, management information and internal coordination that become knowledge centres. As and when problems arise in any unit in the organisation, these knowledge centres help transfer relevant knowledge to the concerned unit and help it in solving the current problems.

Check Your Progress 4

A distance education institution has to create an effective learning environment for its diverse learner groups in varied locations. There is no single approach or strategy that can respond to this need. A Distance Education institution has to continuously endeavour to do so through its policies, programmes and their delivery, and use of advanced technologies. These efforts are possible with the help of innovation and experiment in these institutions because of their flexibility in terms of its procedures and operations.

The major components to be focussed by any Distance Education institution in its organisational renewal efforts are: building core competence through training; motivating and encouraging personnel to work with new models; MIS for effective information flow and sharing team building, systemic thinking. (Not piecemeal changes).

4.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

(Given below are the titles of a few books/journals which have been used to prepare this Block. It is NOT suggested that you should go looking for these books to study them in original. If you can manage, you may look for a few titles, but they are not obligatory for completing the course successfully).

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