

From Regional to Global: Using a Network Strategy to Align a Multinational Organization

By Maya Townsend, Lisa Coen, and Kittie Watson



In 2012, the most important gaps separating public and government affairs staff among headquarters, regions, and countries at Bayer CropScience (BCS) weren't geographic. Instead, the Global Public and Government Affairs (GPGA) department had implicitly adopted a disconnected approach that limited collaboration and coordination. As it played out, activities in headquarters, regions, and key countries were uncoordinated. The regions often operated independently without engaging with the depth and breadth of expertise throughout the system. They experienced slow information flow, delayed notification of issue developments, and inconsistently communicated feedback from regions about activities related to public policy priorities. Without clearly aligned priorities, goals, strategies, and roles, GPGA was not well positioned to mobilize quickly or effectively in order to address critical policy challenges across the globe.

Realizing that the situation created untenable and increasingly challenging disconnects and public policy risks, BCS leaders sought to build a global organization that would consistently and effectively address external policy challenges. In 2013, BCS leaders hired Lisa Coen as the new head of GPGA. Her mandate was to transform the function into a truly global organization. Her challenge was to allow good work to continue where it was already happening, while building a connected and coordinated global organization. Facing future global challenges would require careful coordination and integration to mitigate risk.

As a new leader, Coen faced considerable challenges. Key questions she considered in her design strategy were:

- Would the organization accept her and her approach?
- Would the team work side-by-side to build success or block progress?
- Would new tools be viewed as alien to the culture or accepted as a novel way to achieve good outcomes?

With a brief window to build the foundation and momentum for change, Coen took steps to engage key stakeholders before natural internal resistance could build. She traversed the globe to meet face-to-face with business leaders and public affairs team members. These conversations were essential for building trust and shifting influence. They also allowed her time for discovery and validation. Coen used the data gathered during these sessions to build her strategy and approach.

Through her interactions with leaders and team members, Coen recognized that only deep knowledge sharing and collaboration would help GPGA successfully and collectively manage public policy issues. To make that happen, GPGA needed to shift from its current structure—a loose confederacy of regional and local offices—to a new structure: an interconnected global network. The extensive feedback from internal leaders and team members brought Coen to this realization, and underscored the strong organizational support to highlight the value of the public and government affairs function. This article describes the approach Coen implemented to begin transforming GPGA into an interconnected global network.

From Hierarchy to Network

The foundation for most organizations is the formal functional structure (Krackhardt & Hanson, 1993). In this model, people congregate around common specialties, such as HR, Finance,

and R&D. Typically, functions are governed through hierarchies, in which directives come from a small, appointed group. Over time, the hierarchical, functional structure, which treats organizations and the people in it as machines, proved too rigid and inflexible to meet complex, rapidly changing market demands and customer needs (Morgan, 1997). Organizations began experimenting with matrix structures that weaved together functions and projects.

In 2012, GPGA functioned as a matrix in name only. In actuality, people worked within region or country on topics relevant to their geographic area (Figure 1, left side). They rarely reached out to people beyond their region, even if they were working on common issues. They acted independently, adjusting to regional or country cultures using their own approaches. Headquarters, at the top of the hierarchy, often assumed regions faced similar challenges and agreed with decisions made at HQ.

Coen believed in the power of collaboration and sought a business model that could enable agility, rapid response, and flexibility. She realized that GPGA needed to maintain the best of the functional structure—allowing people to work quickly with their local contacts—while encouraging people to share materials, ideas, and practices across regions (Figure 1, right side). Drawing on the advantages of the hierarchy, she designated leads to manage work on each major issue. The issue leads were responsible for communicating the vision, encouraging knowledge sharing, connecting people with relevant information to each other, and mediating disputes.

Her vision was best represented by a network model. Organizations adopt network structures when they need flexibility, rapid response, and resilience. Networks, unlike rigidly hierarchical structures, can adapt quickly to changing circumstances (Plastrik & Taylor, 2006). They can assemble and disassemble

subject matter expertise quickly as needed to address new issues and risks. Based on the current and emerging issues BCS faced, Coen wanted an agile, interconnected organization with readiness to both anticipate and respond to issues quickly.

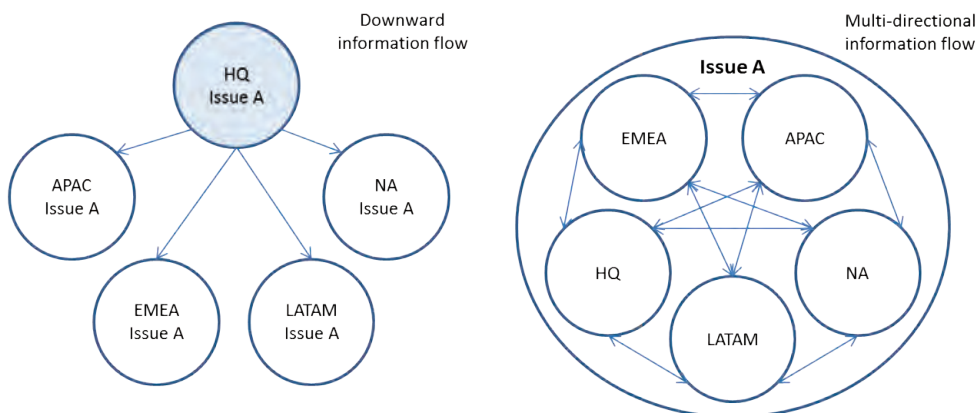
The Need for Change

BCS's products were increasingly vulnerable to market challenges, enabled by increased coordination among consumers worldwide. Technology made it possible for people to share stories and mobilize rapidly across the globe. GPGA needed to adapt to this new reality and build capabilities so it too could mobilize rapidly.

One perfect example related to the GreenGrow

FIGURE 1: GPGA 2012 OPERATING STRUCTURE COMPARED TO COEN'S VISION

The image on the left shows GPGA's operating structure in 2012. Communication flowed mostly downward from HQ to regions (APAC = Asia Pacific, EMEA = Europe, Middle East, & Africa, LATAM = Latin America, NA = North America). Areas didn't collaborate despite working on common issues. The image on the right shows Coen's vision for GPGA. She saw constant, multi-directional communication, coordination, and collaboration among those working on common issues, regardless of their region.



and extended network members from other functional areas, reporting on their working relationships and transactions. The results generated something most organizations don't have: a concrete, data-based picture of how people actually interact, solve problems, make decisions, and perform work. Using the maps allowed people to take a step back from reflexive, defensive responses to change. Instead, most were fascinated to see their organization laid out on paper and became interested in analyzing patterns, strengths, and challenges. In all, the maps allowed people to have different and more productive conversations about organization effectiveness.

The maps demonstrated that colleagues collaborated mostly within regions. However, regions were much more isolated than anticipated, even when they worked on common issues. Figure 2 shows the flow of expertise across regions. Individuals—represented by boxes on the maps—are color coded to represent regions. Each region clusters together, signifying the extent to which people draw on others within their region for expert advice and opinions. The map provides a compelling visual of regional insularity.

The map also shows the centrality of global staffers within the organization. The purple boxes in the middle of the map show employees working at headquarters. They gravitate towards each other; most have no connections to the critical Latin America and Asia Pacific regions, important long-term markets with increasing populations and food security needs. Upon further investigation, it became clear that GPGA operated under the assumption that the headquarters had sufficient expertise and knowledge to be successful without regularly engaging regional or key country staff. This was just the assumption that Coen and Johnson were trying to counteract. They believed that critical knowledge about the organization resided in headquarters *and* regions.

Another finding was that people relied on a core set of colleagues across all activities, such as problem solving, innovating, and decision-making. In some ways, the pattern is expected; it's easier to talk with the person at the desk next to you than the person three time zones away. However, people tended to connect with the same small group, even if group members lacked relevant skills. While sticking with a core group was comfortable, the practice posed risks to GPGA since learning, information, and ideas were not shared beyond the core group or aligned with the overall company strategy.

Using Network Maps to Improve Organization Effectiveness

Johnson was intrigued by the diagrams and concerned that people working on GreenGrow were not connected in ways that supported innovation, problem solving, and expertise sharing. Like the maps for GPGA as a whole, the GreenGrow maps showed that people preferred to work within region for every single activity.

Johnson learned that the GreenGrow expertise and problem solving networks were particularly fragile. The loss of only two employees would cause the both networks to fracture into disconnected parts, preventing effective expertise sharing and problem solving. Without those two people, the network divided into clusters in which the European

region didn't connect with the Latin America or Asia Pacific regions.³ The ease with which the network could fracture showed that not only were relationships regionally dependent, they were also tenuous.

Most alarming was the innovation network (see Figure 3), which is used to imagine entirely new strategies and solutions. Coen and Johnson agreed that GreenGrow innovation was critical. New solutions and methods were needed to respond proactively and creatively to emerging challenges. Actual innovation, however, was meager. Activity occurred within small, disconnected groups usually within regions. For example, Figure 3 shows three separate groups of EMEA staff working independently on innovation (a group of seven and two groups of two). None of the three groups has any link to other regions. Other regions connect slightly more; APAC connects with Global, but only through one staff member (number 126).

Further investigation showed that innovation was limited to those with a natural valence for creativity. It seemed as if these people had learned which of their colleagues shared their proclivity for innovation. Connections were tightly coupled and protected from the rest of the organization, suggesting some concern about how new or innovative ideas might be received. Over the months following the network study, Johnson led discussions of results at leadership team, regional, and small group meetings. These discussions helped people, especially those who didn't attend the initial in-person global meeting, to see GPGA as a whole. They also helped galvanize leaders and network members to action. Public affairs team members began to engage regularly during monthly GPGA update calls. They planned regional and country-level strategy sessions involving public affairs team members from headquarters and different regions in order to tie GPGA strategies to relevant business objectives.

Using Network Maps for Setting Leadership Agendas

Johnson was an emerging leader within GPGA. Coen encouraged him to make use of the maps for his own professional development. He used the data to clarify his leadership goals with more depth and nuance. Specifically, he asked: "What kind of leadership does this network need?"

As a newcomer to GPGA, Johnson had focused on building expertise as a way to establish himself as a leader. The network maps showed that his efforts paid off; people recognized him as a subject-matter expert and consulted him frequently. After viewing his map, Johnson realized that he no longer needed to worry about establishing himself as an expert. His new task was to decrease reliance on himself so he didn't become an expertise bottleneck. He decided to shift his focus from gathering expertise to developing others into knowledge hubs.

³ Both of these employees did leave. One accepted a role at another company while another took an internal promotion to another division. Luckily, Johnson had been proactive by building redundancy in the network and mitigated the potential negative impact of the losses.

Johnson's investigation into the data highlighted an important gap between his goals and actions. One goal was to increase innovation around GreenGrow public affairs initiatives. However, with Johnson's efforts going into knowledge building, he had neglected to encourage creativity. New ideas weren't generated, which wasn't surprising given the sparse activity occurring around innovation. Johnson saw just how peripherally innovation figured into his leadership by looking at the map (Figure 4). He only connected with three people to discuss innovation. Most innovation activity occurred elsewhere. Eager to shift this pattern, Johnson began devoting more attention to creating support for innovation. He planned conferences that weren't all presentation to allow time for discussion, established spaces to facilitate the free flow of ideas, and relaxed structures that inhibited innovation.

Johnson's work did not go unnoticed. Other leaders within the organization asked to engage in similar investigations to help them better understand what kind of actions would best serve their areas. During the course of these discussions, they identified focus areas, retention risks, disconnected areas, and other critical network issues. Over time, they took action to address these issues and become the leaders their people needed.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

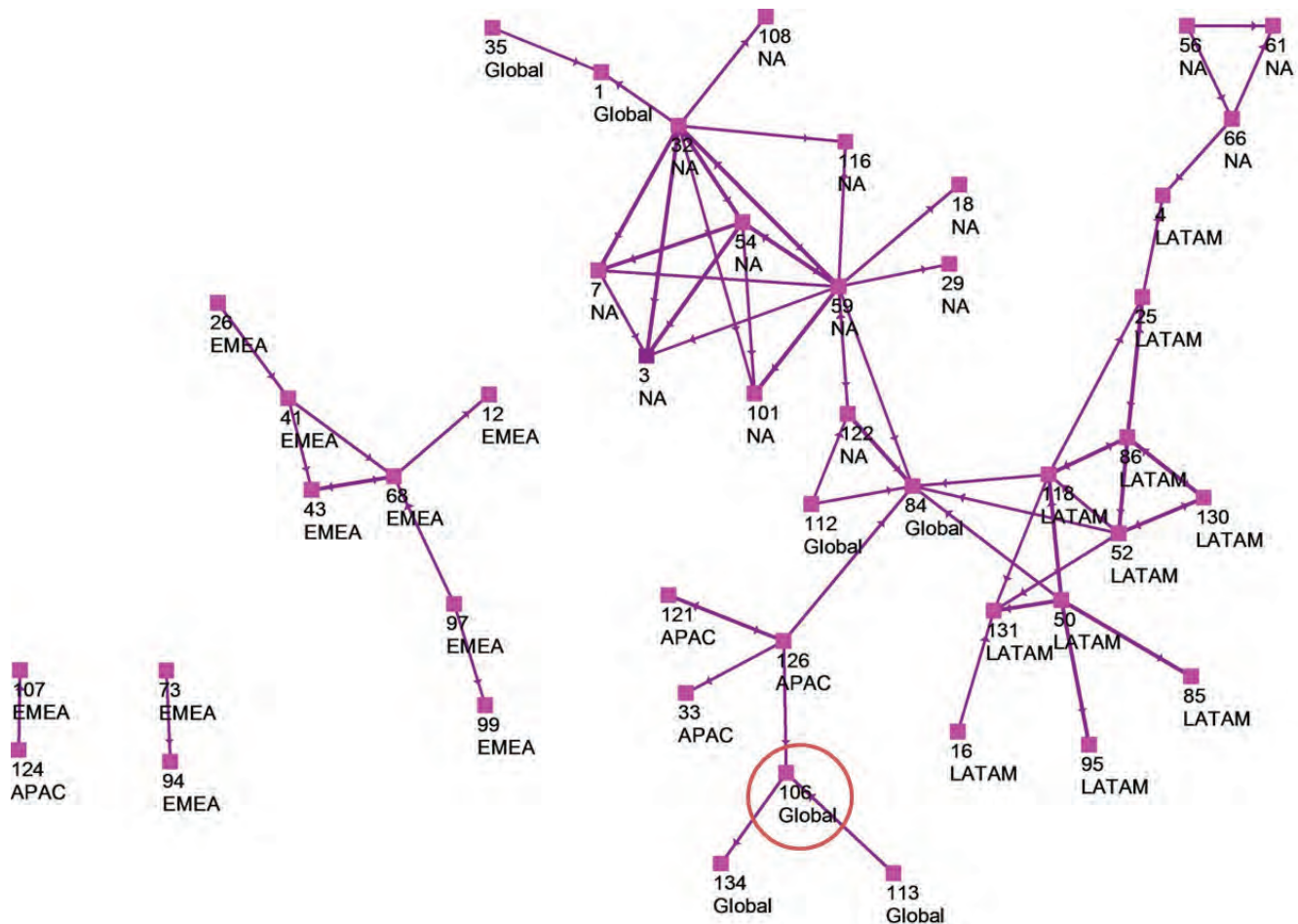
When Coen joined BCS in 2013, GPGA operated using a headquarters knows best philosophy. In this model, headquarters viewed itself as the hub, but was not always clearly connected to regional activity in a manner that could help achieve success on policy challenges. Regional and key country offices developed and implemented local strategies, sometimes in isolation from headquarters' colleagues and experts.

By the time Coen left GPGA in 2015, global, regional, and country public affairs teams engaged more with each other. They had recognized the value of collaborative networks, and were developing a more highly decentralized, networked organization. Reflecting on the process and results offers insights for building a successful internal global network.

Establish a Clear Goal and Strategy

The process required clarity about desired outcomes and detailed planning. Using sequential and integrated steps, Coen intentionally and systematically helped GPGA team members at all levels understand the value proposition for working collaboratively across the regions to increase opportunities to share expertise, solve problems, and enhance innovation.

FIGURE 4: JOHNSON (CIRCLED) NEGLECTED INNOVATION ACTIVITIES WHILE WORKING ON GREENGROW ISSUES.



Listen to Key Stakeholders

Creating a new global team culture within an existing strong, centralized organizational structure is challenging. By listening first, allowing leaders in the regions to have a voice and building relationships across the enterprise, Coen gained a global perspective, established a platform for trust, and engaged others in the process quickly to reduce resistance to change.

The results generated something most organizations don't have: a concrete, data-based picture of how people actually interact, solve problems, make decisions, and perform work.

Engage Leaders in the Process

Building a high-performing, collaborative team takes time and opportunities to participate in the process. It is important to have existing and/or emerging leaders included in the design and process. The in-person meeting, which was used to build understanding and discuss the issues and decisions that most impacted the organization, was an important and early turning point in the transformation.

Use Networking Tools to Visually Demonstrate Performance Gaps

Employees often overestimate their own network engagement and effectiveness. Since it is difficult to assess the impact of our skills, both the interactive in-person activity and ONA provided unique lenses into the dynamic reality of regional and global interactions. The maps provided quantitative results about how their networks actually worked. Sometimes they validated their guesses; other times contradicted their assumptions and frequently forced participants to think differently. The analysis highlighted gaps and opportunities for greater collaboration practices and visually identified team members who had the greatest connectivity and influence.

Engage People in Map-Based Analysis and Problem Solving

People often resist change, feeling threatened by what is perceived as a criticism of their current work styles. Maps allow people to supplant reflexive defensiveness with curiosity and collaboration. Maps take the emphasis away from the individual and, instead, focus on larger, systemic patterns. The blame doesn't lie with any one individual. Instead, the conversation becomes, "How can we help this system become more effective?"

Allow the Data to Build the Case for Improvement

The data itself provided an incentive for change. After seeing the maps, participants immediately made improvements in knowledge sharing. The data helped pinpoint critical relationships gaps and actions needed in each of the regions

to better share expertise, solve problems, and enhance innovation. The maps highlighted untapped experts and allowed greater access to the right issue experts. The maps also helped leaders assess and mitigate risk, such as risks of employees leaving, being overtaxed and losing effectiveness, or facing burn-out.

Increase Individual Leader Insight

The process allowed leaders to gain individual as well as group-level insight. As leaders examined their individual maps, the data helped them see how they might improve their own effectiveness. In addition, the maps encouraged participants to consider who might be left out of their connections and how to better collaborate across the system. Overall, it took them away from perception-based, transaction-oriented views to data-based, holistic views of their organizations.

For leaders and organizations hoping to build an interconnected global network, Coen's experience with BCS provides a roadmap for transforming an organization into something truly different and effective. With deliberate focus, committed leadership, employee engagement, and supporting tools, other organizations can replicate this success and build global networks that maximize resources for greater collaboration and success. 🧩

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