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Andrew Hoffman

Growing Better Together: General Mills Considers Pre-Competitive Collaboration to Advance Sustainable Supply Chains

Kevin O'Donnell, the global director for sourcing & operations sustainability at General Mills, was quietly sitting in his Minneapolis office and looking out the window at the softly falling rain. It was mid-March 2019 and General Mills had just announced its commitment to advance regenerative agriculture practices on one million acres of farmland by 2030.¹ It was an ambitious initiative but O'Donnell and his team were focused on advancing this holistic method of farming in order to protect and enhance the world's natural resources.

However, his mind kept recalling the 2018 Responsible Business Summit in New York City, where he heard former Unilever CEO Paul Polman speak about a novel concept called pre-competitive collaboration. Polman and others had referred to this collaboration as when "competitors share early stages of research that benefit all."² O'Donnell couldn't help but wonder if pre-competitive collaboration could help General Mills do more to address climate change issues within its own supply chain. As he thought back to the conference in New York, he remembered all the indications that not enough progress had been made in the fight against climate change. The world's increasingly frequent catastrophic weather events, including unpredictable floods and droughts, negatively impacted commodity crops required for cereal and food production. O'Donnell knew these environmental problems were a priority for General Mills.

O'Donnell needed to think quickly and strategically about whether he and his team could successfully integrate pre-competitive collaboration into the recently announced regenerative agriculture initiative. Based on General Mills' long and tumultuous competition with other major cereal producers, he knew it would not be easy. But he was tired of the tightly competitive jabs and the back-and-forth on brands and initiatives and thought about the positive scaled effect that this collaboration idea could have. Would it be possible to convince General Mills' competitors to discuss the idea of working together on sustainable and regenerative agricultural projects? How could he prove the viability of the pre-competitive collaboration concept to the General Mills CEO, and then gain internal buy-in? How might this change the industry's supply chain in the long term?

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