PRODUCING around one third of its oil, the Rumaila field in Southern Iraq is the country’s greatest source of revenues, generating more than £150 billion for the state over the past five years.

It has even been suggested that Rumaila, which is owned by Iraq but sub-contracted to BP and China National Oil Petroleum Company (PetroChina), could become the second biggest oil producing field in the world, after Saudi Arabia’s Ghawar Field.

It is a far cry from eight years ago, when production was falling year-on-year following decades of conflict and underinvestment – some equipment was 50 years old. Much of the improvement is obviously due to new technologies and extraction strategies but it seems improved internal communications have also played their role.

In 2010, Iraq’s Ministry of Oil awarded a 20-year contract to the Rumaila Operating Organisation, comprising Basra Oil Company, BP, PetroChina and the State Oil Marketing Organisation, to increase production and modernise every aspect of the operation.

Internal communications was not a priority for the business at the time. Situated to the west of Basra, the Rumaila field, which stretches 80 kilometres by 20 kilometres across challenging terrain, employed a disparate workforce across 40 facilities – mostly operating in isolation. Workplace identity and culture were alien concepts.

BP recruited Pulse Brands, a corporate communications and strategy agency, to help develop a communications function that would unite workers across the three organisations and help them to feel part of one team.

Simon Milton, founder and strategic consultant at Pulse Brands, said:

‘The initial brief was to help develop an identity that could unite three different cultures. The first and most important culture is the Iraqi workforce. It is a state run organisation with a very large, 7,000-plus Iraqi workforce, and we were asked as specialists in internal communications to build a corporate brand to help with its identity. We made the point very early on that Yes, we can help, but our way of operating is that we will create more of a process rather than simply [handing over] an identity.’

While BP was already a client, the oil giant made clear that, for this brief, the Rumaila Operating Organisation was the client. ‘With that core sense of who we were in service to, and working with the newly established communications and external team.

We discovered that people were often working with little contact with colleagues beyond their designated degassing station or even with people who worked different shifts.

LAURA STANLEY FINDS OUT HOW 7,000 IRAQI WORKERS ON THE RUMAILA OIL FIELD WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER UNDER ONE CULTURE AND BRAND

UNITING A DISPARATE WORKFORCE

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The human challenge is modernising every aspect and changing mindsets – making sure people are listened to when they speak out and seen for what they can be.

The new logo went some way to representing this. ‘It is a journey,’ says Milton. ‘The oil field has been operating since the 1950s – it’s a long journey of making sure the workforce is fully heard and supported. The overall challenge is changing behaviour, shifting from one sort of culture to another. It’s been incredibly rewarding, seeing our Iraqi colleagues thrive.’

In ten years’ time, we hope that our work with the C&EA and leadership team will have helped to deliver a modern Iraqi operation for the prosperity of the country, with a set of values and a long-term vision. Safety, determination, one team, respect, personal ownership – these are the values that are driving the organisation.”

The internal newspaper Akhbar Al-Rumaila was launched. Akhbar means news. It has since produced more than 80 editions, in both Arabic and English, and is used as one of the field’s primary communications channels. Intended as a way of connecting employees across multiple facilities, it tells stories of what colleagues are doing in the field with new technologies and techniques. But these stories were not always forthcoming.

‘We had to build trust,’ asserts Milton. ‘Go back eight years, this was not a place full of trust towards an external audience. It didn’t matter who you were: why would they want to share stories with you? Trying to populate the newspaper with stories was a relatively simple process of asking. What does it actually feel like to be a young graduate who has just started or someone who has been working in a particular facility for 30 or more years? People in Basra have great pride in their city’s heritage. It’s a highly educated city, a trading city – it was a vibrant city that has gone through some really tough times. Therefore it was important that a new identity captured all of these stories so that people felt that this was their organisation and that they are contributing to the future.’

The new logo went some way to representing this. ‘It was very important to have a logo that told many stories. For example, the logo looks like an obvious oil drop, but it’s also a drop of sweat. This is an incredibly hardworking, very capable team of engineers who know what they’re doing, and who have kept this facility operating through exceptionally challenging times,’ explains Milton. ‘You can also imagine the seed of a plant – it’s put in the ground, and it’s watered and cared for, that seed will grow into something important and beautiful. So, internally, we talked about the logos being the “seed of hope.”’

Historically, Rumaila had a very hierarchical structure. Its employees had one goal – to deliver production targets. Today’s set of values includes a new emphasis on safety and on the significance of working as one team. Safety had too often been perceived as secondary to production, says Milton. The production challenges get harder over time and they need more advanced techniques but they have PetroChina and BP there to help with that. The human challenge is modernising every aspect and changing mindsets – making sure people are listened to when they speak out and seen for what they can be.

Pulse helped build a new internal communications team (now consisting of eight people), giving ‘them the knowledge, skills and expertise but also confidence in their own abilities, as they were tasked with changing those behaviours and instilling the new values in its workforce. We had to show that people were truly being heard,’ Milton says. ‘Sometimes this is driven through from the top-down, but you can’t do that here. This is a country which has experienced an authoritarian regime, we had to find new ways to engage and build trust with the workforce, underpinned by the key value of respect.’

The initiative started off with leadership tours, but these were logistically difficult since movement across the field can be troublesome. So Pulse introduced other techniques that would help with bringing the workforce together, and engendering that all important trust in what the company was doing. ‘Working with the C&EA Team, Town Halls were established – getting 100 to 300 people in a room to share plans, being open about ambitions for the field, and acting as an open forum for people to voice their concerns,’ says Milton. Regular emails from the general manager and special videos featuring key messages were also shared.

But perhaps most important was the introduction of the Rumaila Way awards. Staff could be nominated for outstanding work, achieving either a gold, silver or bronze award. Testament to the levels of inspiration that the initiative has garnered, just 12 months after it was launched, nominations had risen 230 per cent.

‘Look at where there is excellence,’ says Milton. ‘Tell those stories. Share through the lens of values. Employees can then equate these stories to themselves; they will resonate because they know these people.

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People want to read stories from the field. They want to hear about their own facility, it appeals to human nature.