

## *Gaining Bench Strength Clarity:*

# How the Award-Winning Bench Strength Experience™ Helped the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation Identify and Develop its Top Talent

## THE SITUATION

*“By seeing differently, we do differently.”* - James Hillman

### A VIEW FROM THE TOP



*“We knew we had an opportunity to provide training for our aspiring leaders who are motivated and want to advance.”*

- Dawne Carlson  
Vice President of Human Resources, HBFF

No matter the size or type of your organization, correctly identifying your next generation of leaders isn't always easy or intuitive.

Even with having great experience and the best intentions, our unconscious biases often get in the way of objectively seeing the desired competencies and characteristics we want in our current and future leaders. For example, research shows we tend to overvalue others whose characteristics or approaches are similar to ours. We also tend to give greater weight to someone's more recent performance and assign higher value to those in closer proximity to us.

Given our inherent barriers for predicting talent success, it's no wonder many organizations struggle identifying the high potentials they need to strengthen their leadership bench. A study of more than 1,400 executives worldwide found just one in five employers with competent successors ready to fill executive-level roles, and only 15% prepared with successor candidates for mission-critical roles outside the executive level. For the past two decades, a lack of bench strength has consistently been named in multiple surveys as one of the most important factors within talent management.

A perceived lack of leadership bench strength was the dilemma faced by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation (HBFF), the nation's largest non-profit provider of treatment services for drug and alcohol addiction, with 17 locations in 9 states, and more than 1,600 employees. With roots dating back to 1949, HBFF was created in 2014 through the merger of the Minnesota-based Hazelden Foundation and the California-based Betty Ford Center.



PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCE

 **What Did They Value?**

*“I figured I wouldn’t necessarily learn a whole lot of new stuff about myself, but I was wrong. The biggest take away for me was the results of the assessment. It gave me key areas to focus on and specific action items for development.”*

*“The most beneficial part of the experience was the ability to connect with other employees from all different departments and divisions within the organization, including the videos from senior leadership.”*

*“This gave me a place to connect with people when it felt like everyone was disappearing.”*

- HBFF employees and Bench Strength Experience participants

As with many mission-driven (and bottom line-oriented) organizations, HBFF’s leadership had for years focused primarily on serving the needs of its clients—and ensuring HBFF’s daily financial viability. Long-term strategies like identifying and developing high-potential talent fell by the wayside in favor of tackling more pressing needs. HBFF employees noticed, pointing out in the organization’s annual employee engagement surveys a perceived lack of development opportunities for talented employees committed to the organization.

“Our employees said, ‘There’s no training for me. I may aspire to be a leader someday, but there’s no place for me to get training other than on-the-job experience,’” said Dawne Carlson, Vice President of Human Resources, HBFF. “Our senior team agreed, saying ‘We’re not really doing justice to our prospective leaders. And we are fooling ourselves if we think people are going to be patient for long enough that they’re just going to wait until it’s their turn.’ We knew we had an opportunity to provide training for our aspiring leaders who are motivated and want to advance.”

Based on HBFF’s trusted relationship with MDA Leadership as a partner in assessing their leaders and managers, the organization engaged MDA in discussions on how to solve for this need: delivering meaningful leadership growth opportunities to an underserved population while also raising the organization’s talent acumen and insights into their leadership bench. Together, MDA and HBFF landed on piloting MDA’s **Bench Strength Experience™**, a comprehensive, industry-leading assessment and development program designed to give clients critical insight into the depth, breadth, and diversity of their leadership talent—and provide participants with an unmatched learning and development journey. The question then turned to who to select to participate in the inaugural experience.

THE MDA SOLUTION

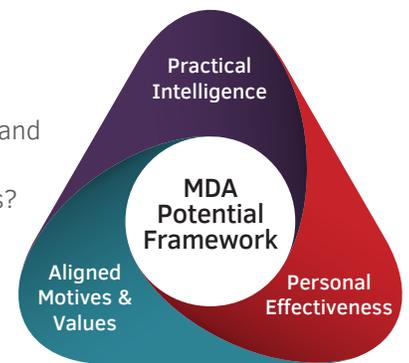
Built on a foundation of scientific leadership research, **Bench Strength Experience** is based on MDA’s 40 years of expertise assessing and developing leaders for mission-critical roles in top organizations. Leveraging a best-in-class assessment and a high-tech learning platform, the experience accurately identifies leadership potential in the early stages of employees’ careers and gives these employees and their managers the development insights and tools needed to accelerate true leadership growth. It also provides the sponsoring organization with an aggregate report detailing the extent of its bench strength preparedness.

The **Bench Strength Experience** is particularly useful for assessing and developing leaders entering or in new supervisory or managerial roles. It measures these three key foundational components of leadership potential:

**Practical intelligence**—Is the person curious? Do they manage complexity well, show good judgement despite ambiguity, and think effectively about the future?

**Personal effectiveness**—Does the person take initiative and persist in challenging situations? Can they influence and direct others’ efforts, while building trusting relationships?

**Aligned motives and values**—Are their values, goals, and behaviors aligned with the organization? Are they clear about their current capabilities and future goals, and seeking opportunities to learn?



HBFF received over 60 nominations and ultimately selected 41 employees to be the organization’s first cohort to participate in the **Bench Strength Experience**. These employees then began a three-month learning and development journey with MDA that included individual assessments and a development experience with their cohort peers through a combination of live sessions and digital collaborative learning. The blended learning was particularly critical, as this occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting face-to-face contact among participating employees.

Participants engage each other through live learning sessions and our award-winning digital platform on which best-in-class thought leadership and content combine with collaborative learning to create a truly one-of-a-kind experience. Participants prepare for the journey with an immersion in growth mindset, understanding what it means to lead, and later translate their assessment insights into specific actions for growth.

If anything, the pandemic’s forced social isolation encouraged the HBFF participants to lean into the **Bench Strength Experience** even more. They soaked in as much individual and group learning as possible and excitedly shared their experiences online with one another, overcoming any geographical separation. “This gave me a place to connect with people when it felt like everyone was disappearing,” said one woman.

The result of HBFF’s **Bench Strength Experience** proved incredibly fulfilling and enjoyable for the 41 original participants—and eye-opening for the organization’s leadership. So much so that after the first cohort of employees had completed their Bench Strength Experience, HBFF quickly launched a new cohort of employees to participate again with plans to continue into the foreseeable future.

A VIEW FROM THE TOP



**What Did HBFF Value?**

*“With Bench Strength, we learned that any person who was hired using MDA’s leadership assessment scored measurably better than those who were not.”*

- Dawne Carlson  
Vice President of Human Resources, HBFF

**THE IMPACT**

Foundationally, **Bench Strength Experience** is intended to deliver exceptional early identification insights and value for individual participants, their leaders, and their sponsoring organizations.

**Benefits of the MDA Bench Strength Experience™**

For the Individual	For Managers	For the Organization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Powerful insights into their leadership strengths and growth opportunities.</li> <li>• Broader relationships across the organization and deeper peer-to-peer learning networks.</li> <li>• Belief in the power of a growth mindset applied to intentional professional development.</li> <li>• Robust feedback that translates into a relevant development plan and meaningful manager conversations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment on the differences between high performance and potential for leadership.</li> <li>• How to coach and lead with a growth mindset and create a development culture.</li> <li>• Tools and a framework to facilitate meaningful career conversations with their employees.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unparalleled insights into the breadth, depth, and diversity of lower levels of the leadership pipeline and those who might someday be candidates for leading others (e.g., supervisors, managers) and leading leaders (e.g., directors).</li> <li>• Talent analytics that can be leveraged to inform future talent development strategy and investment.</li> </ul>

All delivered via a powerful, scalable, and flexible technology-enabled learning platform.

### A VIEW FROM THE TOP



#### What Did HBFF Value?

*“In terms of engagement and retention, employees said, ‘This is really good. I am being invested in.’ It’s created this magnetic appeal of if you’re interested in leader development, then this program will really help you.”*

**- Dawne Carlson**  
Vice President of Human Resources, HBFF

According to Carlson, who led HBFF’s participation in **Bench Strength Experience**, program participants rapidly learned much about their leadership strengths and development opportunities. This directly addressed many employees’ previously expressed concerns about a perceived lack of internal development opportunities.

Carlson reported: “In terms of engagement and retention, employees said, ‘This is really good. I am being invested in.’ It created this magnetic appeal that if you’re interested in leadership development, then this program will really help you.”

The beneficial impact of MDA’s development work with **Bench Strength Experience** participants quickly showed. When one participant was interviewed for a promotion, Carlson noted there was no comparison with other candidates with similar experience. As an HBFF leader observed about this participant, “Her self-awareness and intentionality behind what she was working on set her apart head and shoulders from the other candidates, and she got the job.”

For the organization, the aggregate report on HBFF’s overall bench strength was invaluable. First, it learned that identifying your next generation of leaders isn’t always easy or intuitive. One interesting, yet counterintuitive, insight was that the most recent hires demonstrated more leadership potential than more tenured employees. “With Bench Strength, we learned that any person who was hired using MDA’s leadership assessment scored measurably better than those who were not,” Carlson said. “We saw really clear evidence that assessments matter. They truly do predict leadership potential.”

In addition, in the months that followed the initial implementation, 14.6% of participants were promoted to a leadership position internally, with more likely to follow. For successive waves, executive leadership team members were involved as coaches and storytellers and additional HR business partners supported the participant experience. Four participants from Wave 1 went through the Wave 2 2021 experience on the manager track with direct reports of their own participating. Insights from the aggregate data led the design team to incorporate content around diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as integrate a module around financial acumen for all participants.

## CONCLUSION

HBFF had never previously undertaken anything like **Bench Strength Experience**, yet soon participants were raving about the program, then it won a 2021 Brandon Hall Group Gold Award for Excellence in the Best Advance in Leadership Development category. Winning organizations demonstrated a people-centric approach while driving superior business results.

“We felt like it was a really good value,” Carlson said. “Bench Strength was turnkey, yet customized. The program was beautiful and elegant in its simplicity, clear in its mission, and allowed us to customize pieces of it to make it look like it was our own. Bench Strength has been one of the best things we’ve done in the past two years. Quite simply, it has been a really transformative experience for all of us.”