

Bracken McKey Debunks 5 Myths About How Decisions Actually Work Under Pressure

Bracken McKey of Washington County, Oregon, outlines the misconceptions that quietly lead to poor judgment in high-stakes situations.



Beaverton, Oregon Apr 9, 2026 ([Issuewire.com](https://www.issuewire.com)) - After decades of handling serious criminal cases, attorney and former Chief Deputy District Attorney Bracken McKey has seen how decisions succeed—or fail—long before outcomes are visible.

In a new breakdown, McKey addresses five common myths that shape how people think about decision-making under pressure. Each one sounds reasonable. Each one breaks down in practice.

“Most mistakes didn’t come from bad intent,” McKey has said. “They came from rushed decisions and missed patterns.”

Myth 1: More Information Leads to Better Decisions

This belief holds because it feels safe. More data suggests more control. In reality, high-volume environments show the opposite. As information increases, attention fragments. Studies on cognitive

load show that decision accuracy drops when people process too many inputs at once. In serious casework, the strongest decisions often come from identifying the one fact that matters, not collecting ten more that do not. “Good ideas only matter if they work,” McKey has said. “And most of the time, what works is simple, repeatable, and consistent.” The issue is not access to information. It is the ability to filter it under pressure.

Myth 2: Pressure Sharpens Judgment

Pressure is often framed as a performance enhancer. It is not. It compresses thinking. Research across legal and medical fields shows that sustained pressure leads to faster but less accurate decisions. Judges, for example, have been found to shift toward more default rulings later in long sessions. In high-stakes legal work, pressure rarely improves clarity. It reduces it. “You don’t notice the change right away,” McKey has said. “But by the end of the day, you’re making different decisions than you would have in the morning.” The shift is gradual, which is why it often goes unnoticed.

Myth 3: Experience Prevents Mistakes

Experience builds confidence, and confidence often gets mistaken for accuracy. In practice, experience changes how decisions are made, but it does not remove the conditions that lead to error. Even seasoned professionals make weaker decisions under heavy volume or fatigue. What experience actually provides is pattern recognition—the ability to see what is familiar and what is not. But pattern recognition still depends on attention. “Volume changes how people think, even when they don’t notice it,” McKey has said. Experience improves judgment only when the conditions allow it to.

Myth 4: Big Outcomes Come From Big Moments

This myth is reinforced by how outcomes are presented. Trials, negotiations, and major decisions appear to hinge on a single turning point. In reality, outcomes are shaped earlier and more quietly. In criminal prosecutions, the decisive work happens during file review, evidence analysis, and early investigation. By the time a case reaches a courtroom, most of the trajectory is already set. The same pattern applies elsewhere. Small decisions, repeated over time, carry more weight than one dramatic moment. “Most progress happens before anything goes wrong,” McKey has said. “It starts with noticing how decisions are made.” The visible moment is rarely the decisive one.

Myth 5: If a Decision Feels Right, It Is Probably Right

Instinct feels efficient. It feels earned. Under pressure, it becomes the default. But instinct is influenced by fatigue, repetition, and bias. Research on decision fatigue shows that as mental energy declines, people rely more on familiar choices rather than accurate ones. In high-stakes environments, this leads to predictable errors—overconfidence in weak assumptions or acceptance of incomplete information. Instinct is not unreliable, but it is conditional. It works best when supported by structure and awareness. Without that, it reflects the decision-maker’s state more than the reality of the situation.

If You Only Remember One Thing

Decision quality does not fail all at once.
It drifts.

The drift comes from volume, pressure, and repetition—not from lack of knowledge.

Take One Step Today

These myths persist because they feel practical. They match how people want decisions to work.

They do not match how decisions actually work under pressure.

Readers are encouraged to choose one myth, observe how it shows up in their own decisions, and share this list with someone who faces constant decision-making in their work.

Clarity starts with recognition.

About Bracken McKey

Bracken McKey is an attorney based in Washington County, Oregon, and the owner of McKey Law. He served more than 25 years with the Washington County District Attorney's Office, including roles as Senior Deputy District Attorney and Chief Deputy District Attorney. During his public service career, he handled many of Oregon's most serious and high-profile cases, including homicide, attempted murder, and complex felony prosecutions. His work also involved cross-industry collaboration on crime prevention efforts, earning recognition such as the Recording Industry Association of America Gold Record Law Enforcement Award and the Oregon Construction Industry Crime Prevention Law Enforcement Partner Award. He retired from public service in 2024 and continues to apply his experience in legal practice, focusing on decision-making, risk evaluation, and case strategy.

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