

Mind Over Moment

By Michael Elhihi

Why Good Officers Can Still Make Bad Decisions

I genuinely believe that every company officer comes to work trying to make the right decision. That's the goal. None of us shows up hoping to make a bad call. And the truth is, the more time you spend in the job, the more sets and reps you accumulate, the more experience you gain, the better your decision-making generally becomes. More experience means more pattern recognition. More problems solved. More opportunities to operate in pixelated environments where you don't have all the information but still have to act. Very little can replace experience. It's one of the greatest advantages we have as leaders because it stacks the odds in our favor when the next decision needs to be made. But no one is immune to making a bad decision. No one. In fact, experience has a darker side. If we're not careful, the same experience that sharpens our judgment can also create blind spots that quietly influence it.

Our brains are processing information every second of every day. To keep up, they rely on mental shortcuts known as cognitive biases. Honestly, our job almost demands it. Time is rarely on our side, and we're constantly making decisions with incomplete information. Those shortcuts help us recognize patterns, solve problems, and make decisions faster. Most of the time, that's a good thing. But they can also quietly influence how we interpret information and assess risk. If we're not aware of them, they can lead to the normalization of deviance, where something starts feeling right simply because we've done it before. The problem is, no two incidents are ever the same. What worked yesterday may not be the right decision today. That's why understanding how our brains make decisions is just as important as understanding the tactics behind them.

Action Bias

Action bias is the tendency to act simply because a situation feels urgent. As company officers, we naturally associate action with decisiveness. When an incident starts unfolding or a problem lands in front of us, there's an internal pull to do something. Anything. We don't want to look indecisive, and we certainly don't want to fall behind the incident. While decisive leadership is important, urgency does not always require immediate commitment. Sometimes the best decision is taking a few extra seconds to gather information before committing crews, making a personnel decision, or choosing a course of action. Those few seconds can completely change the picture.

Confirmation Bias

Once we develop an initial impression, our brains naturally begin looking for information that supports it. This is confirmation bias. Whether we're sizing up a structure fire or trying to understand a personnel issue, it becomes easy to focus on the information that confirms what we already believe while overlooking the information that points us in another direction. The reality is, we're usually going to find what we're looking for. That's why you have to challenge yourself. Ask yourself, "*What am I missing?*"

or *"What information doesn't fit my initial impression?"* Be deliberate about second-guessing yourself. Changing your assessment when the facts change isn't a weakness. I think it's actually good judgment.

Plan Continuation Bias

Having a plan is important. Knowing when to change that plan is just as important. Plan continuation bias is our tendency to stick with the original plan even after conditions have changed. I'll be honest, I've been guilty of this and still catch myself doing it. A lot of it comes down to ego. We invest in a decision, we want it to work, and sometimes we keep pushing forward instead of recognizing that the situation has changed. On the fireground, that might mean continuing an offensive strategy despite deteriorating conditions. In the office, it might look like managing an employee the same way even though the approach clearly isn't working. Reassess, adapt to new information, and understand that changing the plan isn't a sign of indecision. It's a sign of good judgment.

Normalcy Bias

Experience allows us to recognize patterns, but it can also convince us that today's situation is going to look like yesterdays. That's normalcy bias. We start assuming things will play out the way they usually do simply because they always have. I've caught myself doing it. A routine alarm, a familiar building, or an employee who has never been a problem before can all create a false sense of predictability. Every incident and every conversation deserve a fresh assessment. Let experience guide your thinking, but never replace it.

Ego

Perhaps the most difficult bias to recognize is ego because it's the hardest one to see in ourselves. Ego isn't just arrogance. It's allowing the need to be right to become more important than making the right decision. I've been there. It can keep us from asking questions, accepting feedback, or changing our minds when new information tells us we should. Confidence is an essential leadership trait, but confidence without humility can quickly become a liability.

Understanding cognitive biases is not about becoming a psychologist. It is about becoming a better decision maker. Every one of us is influenced by these mental shortcuts because that's how our brains work. We are being human! But the goal isn't to eliminate them. The goal is to recognize when they might be influencing your thinking, slow yourself down just enough to ask a better question, and make a better decision. Experience will always matter, but experience paired with self-awareness is a powerhouse.