Imam Ali (a.s.) gives advice on problem solving

Nine Essential Steps to solving a problem

Lessons from "Nahjul Balaghah, Letter No.31, conveying his wishes to his son Imam Hassan (AS) following his death (wasiyat)
How many times have we wondered how to solve a problem? In his will to his son Imam Hassan (AS) Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) indicates nine essential steps a person should take.

1. Seek Allah's Help:

"And before you probe into this, you should begin by asking your Allah's help, and turning to Him for competence…"

This is the first and foremost step. A Muslim relies solely on Allah's and seeks His help only.

2. Clear Your Mind:

"…and keep aloof from everything that throws you into doubt or flings you towards misguidance. When you have made sure that your heart is clean and humble and your thoughts have come together and you have only one thought which is about the matter…"

"…but if you have not been able to achieve that peace of observation and thinking which you would like to have, then know that you are only stamping the ground like a blind she-camel and falling into darkness. it is better to avoid this..."

No irrelevant matters be brought into the equation when considering an issue.

3. Think Objectively:

"Then I feared that you might get confused as other peoples had been confused on account of their passions and (different) views."

Emotions, prejudices and strongly held views should be set aside. The matter should be considered objectively.

4. Learn From Others:

"...place before it the events of past people..."

"...so that you might be ready to accept through your intelligence the results of the experience of others and be saved from going through these experiences yourself."

A person should consider how others have tackled the issue or solved the problem. You can learn a lot from this and avoid repeating their mistakes.

5. Don't Worry About Others:

"But when I confined myself to my own worries leaving the worries of others, my intelligence saved me and protected me from my desires."

The consideration of public opinion – whether people will like what you do or not – should not enter into arriving at a decision.

BUT

"...make yourself the measure (for dealings) between you and others. Thus, you should desire for others what you desire for yourself and hate for others what you hate for yourself. Do not oppress as you do not like to be oppressed. Do good to others as you would like good to be done to you. Regard bad for yourself whatever you regard bad for others. Accept that (treatment) from others which you would like others to accept from you... Do not say to others what you do not like to be said to you."

The decision (action) should not infringe on the right of others.

6. Acquire Knowledge First:

"Give up discussing what you do not know and speaking about what does not concern you."

"Your search should first be by way of understanding and learning and not by falling into doubts or getting entangled in quarrels."

A person should obtain all necessary knowledge about matters relating to the issue before arriving at a decision.

7. To Take Risks Or Not:

"Keep off the track from which you fear to go astray because refraining when there is fear of straying is better than embarking on dangers."

"It is easier to rectify what you miss by silence than to secure what you lose by speaking."

Unnecessary risks should be avoided. "Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread."

BUT

"Leap into dangers for the sake of right wherever it be."

One should not hesitate in taking a risk if and when necessary.

8. Don't Overburden Yourself:

"Do not load your back beyond your power lest its weight become a mischief for you."

One should only undertake a responsibility which one can fulfil – no more.

9. Should You Be Firm or Lenient:

"Where leniency is unsuitable, harshness is leniency. Often cure is illness and illness is cure. Often the ill-wisher gives correct advice while the well-wisher cheats."

At times one has to be harsh to solve a problem. One should not hesitate to do this if necessary.