

FROM  
PROBLEM-SOLVING  
TO RESPONSIBLE  
DECISION-MAKING



NORMA S. GUERRA &  
ABELARDO VILLARREAL

# **From Problem-Solving to Responsible Decision-Making**

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*by*

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# PREFACE

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*From Problem-Solving to Responsible Decision-Making* relates the story of problem-solving with life examples from the Castillo and Mendoza families who emigrated to the U.S. and how they explored human development challenges, conflict management, and change as critical elements of self, self-identity, and community. The inspiration for this project began with a strong bond between a mother, Rosie Mendoza Guerra, who has a passion for collecting names, pictures, and stories, and her daughter, Norma Guerra, the book's lead author, whose imagination and wisdom led to the creation of this book. Each time we (aunts, uncles, and cousins Evelyn Bollinger, and Deborah Shandley) met for family chats, conversations circled back to our glorious and shared past. As photo albums appeared, new questions surfaced about what, who, and why the family took the path they did. What were the challenges, how were they met? And then there were discussions involving the problem-solving activities and consequences. The thirst for more knowledge led to months and years of research (i.e., deeds, licenses, and documented transactions).

One day, at an informal family gathering, a shift in our usual conversations culminated in the inclusion of another cousin, Dr. Rebecca Karimi, an archaist, who had conducted intensive research on the Mendoza family. She had a collection of oral histories from many of the Mendoza grandchildren, now elders or deceased. She graciously shared those Mendoza-recorded narratives. The information gathered from these narratives provided the foundation for Chapters 1 and 6. Thanks to Rebecca, Evelyn, and Deborah for their open willingness to share collected data, stories, and research. We faced a challenge in describing momentous life events in a

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non-glamorized manner, but we managed to be objective in our descriptions of events shared in this book. Still with the collaboration of Dr. Abelardo Villarreal, a researcher, educator, and writer, along with my family, this book's content fulfilled the goal of highlighting the nuances of the family's decision-making events and their impact on later generations.

We also managed to focus on those events that displayed the family's commitment to honesty and fairness, as shown through their desire to adapt to this country. These events exemplify problems they faced and describe the prevailing problem-solving approaches: straightforward and complex; the latter requiring a collaborative effort to implement responsible decision-making skills. Four critical features of these problem-solving approaches included: (1) context—environment and setting; (2) actors—persons affected by decisions; (3) problem complexity—including problems with multiple challenges broken down into smaller problem-solving events; and (4) outcomes and consequences—implications of outcomes that affect actors because of a decision. Each chapter concludes with “Stones of Remembrance” to summarize key points and practical applications of concepts learned.

This book aims to engage you, the reader, in a discussion of problem-solving as a life skill, strengthened through guided instruction to reinforce existing competence as a problem-solver and hands-on experiential activities. It addresses the importance of *self* in problem-solving and in responsible decision-making. In today's complex world, these life skills have become vital to ensure our goal as a leader of the free world.

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# INTRODUCTION

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## OVERVIEW

The goal of this book is to examine problem-solving use under single-focused and complex settings with the LIBRE (Listen, Identify a concern, Brainstorm, Reality test, Encourage) Model. Problems vary in size and impact. We will discuss problem-solving basic principles, referencing the Castillo-Mendoza clan, who lived in Mexico in the late 1800s, to illustrate their practical application. Their journey is a good example of methodically confronting challenges through problem-solving and collaborative decision-making. This journey is a historical recounting of their rich problem-solving experiences, and their legacy will live for as long as the family keeps it alive. Access to this experience-based wisdom has broadened our understanding of how to approach straightforward and complex problems.

These problem-solving and responsible decision-making stories powerfully illustrate this one family's enlightened responses to the crises. The advantage for us, as readers, is that the selected families set the tone and offered examples of their (1) problem-solving outcomes, (2) values, beliefs, ethics, and assets, and (3) ownership in managing problems. Events and documents support their decision-making wisdom and have become a reference we use to help us with our daily life challenges. Furthermore, following their family journey allows us the space to reflect and document their value to all family members. The "Stones of Remembrance" is that section in this book that represents a repository of their legacy and wisdom. The stones are organic symbols of lasting and significant thoughts, memories, and experiences, which have been documented as jewels of

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knowledge shared across generations. All other details are in oral history narratives. Acknowledging these limitations offers a perspective when presenting a series of problem-solving events. Their journey is an inventory of defying challenges and the methodically designed strategies generated through strategic problem solving and collaborative decision-making. The historical recounting casts a net of mind-body-spirit knowledge and wisdom suitable for the young, old, and the community.

Five tenets frame problem-solving as a thoughtful process that can involve one or groups of individuals, acting singularly or in community with others. These tenets include: (1) Each person is a unique agent with a specialized life that aligns with the person's skills, experiences, and assets. This person has talents, skills, and the freedom to change, which are characteristic of normal cognitive functioning and self-awareness. Although some people may have never considered themselves change agents, they, in fact, unknowingly play that role daily. As such, what do you see? A compliant, easy-going person whose flexibility capitulates or adjusts to accommodating other people? You manage your actions, thinking, and being accordingly.

As you read this book, consider the cognitive function and mental skills necessary to problem-solve in a systematic and organized way. (2) We all come from a family or unit of people who contribute to who we are becoming and who we are today. (3) We cannot underestimate the importance of community. Living, learning, and accommodating communities supply information about how to live. In watching others and how to solve problems, we learn about life, the good, the bad, and the unstated experiences. (4) Over time, we develop patterns in managing ourselves with the challenges and problems we face. We develop an appreciation of self and expound on our unique traits, skills, and temperaments. (5) The person you are or aspire to be is associated with values defined in daily living and in problem-solving. As we look at challenges and their management through a deliberate and distinct lens, we will see problem-solving approaches from different viewpoints. We stress the importance of "responsible decision-making" as key to complex problem-solving events. It refers to a collaborative approach managed by groups to address complex problems. Corporate businesses have boards of directors to help manage such concerns. We, too, could benefit by seeking the wisdom of others with more specialized expertise. At the end of most chapters, "Stones of Remembrance" provides interactive exercises to apply these principles in real-life scenarios.

Following reflection, readers review their conflict management strategy and complete plans for brainstorming and reality-testing proposed solutions and their consequences. The book's organization consists of three sections: Section I: Problem-Solving, Section II: Responsible Decision Making, and Section III: You and Your Journey.

## **Section I: Problem-Solving**

The first section consists of five chapters. Chapter 1, “The Story Begins” invites the reader to join and partner in our journey throughout the book.

The Castillo and Mendoza families are the key actors in this historical journey that happened as Spain offered land grants to settle in the New World. Our unleashed imagination captured the intriguing and harsh life of these families that sought a better life in a more conducive environment. Reference to actual occurrences, documentation from family events, oral histories, legal documents, and church files provide evidence of historical significance. The book focuses on family inferences behind the scenes and discussions intended to support text concepts. Extended-living family members who may one day read this book will appreciate this caveat. This chapter presents events to help us ponder problem-solving as a life skill.

Chapter 2, “Self and Identity in Problem-Solving,” examines a person’s various roles in the problem-solving exchange. The chapter presents three developmental theories that examine self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management. Furthermore, it discusses self—the “who we are” and identity” the groomed self, who we are becoming” to set the stage for the presentation of developmental considerations in conflict management. Examined are daily challenge occurrence(s) and responses found in everyone’s life that reflect “who we are” and “a groomed response.” The chapter closes with definitions of self-in-identity, descriptions of what makes up a problem, and the basic ingredients in problem-solving. “Stones of Remembrance” supplies space to consider lessons learned and any potential takeaways.

Chapter 3, “When Challenge Occurs,” explores self-in-identity as critical to identifying challenges or problems. We briefly discuss how we naturally want our base to be calm. Identity—who we are becoming—offers space to consider conflict management. Like most problems, conflict is often associated with social exchange, involving oneself and other aggrieved people(s). For instance, the person who says, “If I am doing what I want, when I want, as I want, then there is no problem.” The chapter discusses approach/avoidance tendencies and personal crisis management as articulated through Erikson’s stages of development (Erikson, 1963) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968). The chapter closes with a discussion of crisis resolution implications and with the “Stones of Remembrance.”

Chapter 4, “Strategy for Addressing the Problem,” discusses the LIBRE (Listen, identify a concern, Brainstorm, Reality-test, Encourage) Model (Guerra, 2015, 2016) and LIBRE Model Engagement styles (Guerra, 2006, 2009b). Self-awareness and self-management are developmental qualities that individuals develop through life experiences and social affordances.

The chapter closes with a discussion of the problem-solving process and “Stones of Remembrance.”

Chapter 5, “Reflections on Problem-Solving,” examines the gains and losses associated with a straightforward problem-solving approach as it affects self and community. There is a discussion on the importance of the human development process, crisis management, hierarchical physiological, psychological, and social needs, ecological, and engagement styles. The chapter closes with a discussion on the critical role of self, self-awareness, and the whole person. “Stones of Remembrance” reviews lessons learned.

## **Section II: Responsible Decision Making**

This section, Chapter 6, “The Story Continued,” outlines additional Castillo-Mendoza events using the following framework: What is involved in solving complex challenges? Who wins or loses in problem-solving? What role does the community play in brainstorming and selecting workable solutions? “Stones of Remembrance” closes the chapter.

Chapter 7, “Responsible Decision-Making: Context and Relational Climate,” examines the value of self as an integral part of a community. Environmental cues provide valuable information for managing oneself and others. The focus is on community values and individual self-identity. Kaufman’s (2020) examines and explores self-actualization and its connection to whole-person principles. The problem-solving event equally emphasizes self and context when considering a problem. The chapter closes with “Stones of Remembrance,” a collection of personalized takeaways.

Chapter 8 examines “Responsible Decision-Making: The Identified Concern.” The questions explored include: How does one become a whole person? How does one balance one’s needs in the community without losing oneself or sacrificing identity? Consider when and where to acknowledge *self* within the problem-solving exchange. The problem solver must be an integral part of the problem-identification process. The “Stones of Remembrance” include self-reflection activities and lessons learned.

Chapter 9, “Processing Responsible Decision-Making: Brainstorming and Reality-Testing,” discusses a problem-solving approach, specifically through a self-actualized lens (Guerra, 2016), emphasizing community-based brainstorming and reality-testing of solutions. The chapter concludes with an introduction to the last step of the LIBRE Model, Encouragement, which is the planned resolution stage. A mantra statement embodies the lesson learned from the exchange and reinforces the value of the collaborative-based resolution. This discussion also captures the essence of ecological

layering on the development of the resolution plan. “Stones of Remembrance” stresses the importance of lessons learned.

Section II: Chapter 10 “Responsible Decision-making: Encouraged to Plan,” opens with a revisit to the question, What is involved in responsible decision making? We discuss the differences between straightforward problem-solving and collaborative decision-making. This chapter challenges us to reflect on personal and communal growth. We consider these questions: “Who contributes to the developed shared values in the community?” “What are your lived values,” “Do your values fit you?” “Do your values fit your self-identity?” “Have you allowed yourself space to grow?” “Does your self-identity fit in your community?”

A combination of self and community and the best of self and the best of community in addressing challenges is at the crux of problem-solving. The integrated investment of both (self and community) is necessary to face complex challenges. Just to remind ourselves that self and social awareness are the foundation to effective problem-solving. “Stones of Remembrance” invites us to consider takeaway lessons.

### **Section III: You on Your Journey**

The book concludes by reflecting on the Castillo-Mendoza story, examining the problem-solving results and feedback from the descendants who relocated to Texas for a fresh start.

Chapter 11, “From Problem-Solving to Responsible Decision-Making: Stones of Remembrance,” examines the role of key markers in the LIBRE Model decision stages that support problem-solving efficacy. We reinforce the idea that Erikson’s life span model is a framework for communities to reevaluate self-in-identity as human growth and development as central in the problem-solving and responsible decision-making processes. We review self-in-identity in community as an integral part of human growth and development. Proposed is a problem-solving approach that shows the intersection of self-actualized “best of you” with the self-actualized “best of community” when considering complex challenges. The chapter invites readers to explore their personal history and family narratives when facing problems. “Stones of Remembrance” space allows the reader to organize the chapter’s takeaways.

Chapter 12, “My Family Responsible Decision-Making Experience,” provides intentional space to create and document mission, goals, and accomplishments. To offer an example, the author begins with her story.

Consider the prompts given that address context, ecological and crisis-oriented development, and intersectionality of self, as a whole person in a community. The significance of self, as a whole person contributing to

the community, values developed with others, and extended systems offer an opportunity to identify values associated with crisis management. In others, we learn from past problem-solving experiences—what worked and what was ineffective and aligned with our shared values. Networking bolsters skilled people’s ability, and their wisdom informs the collaborative problem-solving process. Furthermore, it is an advantage that increases the impact of responsible decision-making. “Stones of Remembrance” offers lessons learned for potential takeaways. The intersectionality of past and present family “pláticas” involves more than exchanging stories; they were forums for deep discussions around values to forge a better life. They addressed the consequences of decisions made to face pressing and managing life challenges. Who made the problem-solving decisions, and who benefited from the resolutions? From historical and notable events, people, and opportunities, we learned how diversity of values and beliefs affected decisions that had an impact on life for generations.

The chapter provides lessons applicable today; the historical examples were to inform future decision-making processes. We present the LIBRE Model with questions to frame and present a narrative to practice problem-solving exchanges.

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# **SECTION I**

## **PROBLEM-SOLVING**

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## CHAPTER 1

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# THE STORY BEGINS

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Spain's colonization efforts extended to Florida and Mexico by the 1800s. The Spanish government offered land grants to lure and motivate settlers to inhabit these new lands. The Castillo family, Nicomedes and Felipa, was one of those families. Leaving Spain, they embarked on a journey to Mexico to begin their new life together as a young couple on their claimed land grant near Matehuala, Mexico. Their unwavering faith was steadfast that, without a resolute belief in God, they would not have endured the hardships of the move. Their strong faith and religious beliefs influenced every aspect of their lives. They were devoted parents who welcomed their two daughters and catered to them, providing a good environment and education. The Castillos understood the importance of handwork and building trusting relationships and, using their baking skills they mastered in Spain, opening a bakery they named *Rizo de Oro* (Golden Curl or Strand). This business title was significant for their family, serving as their signature branding and business identity. With the family expanding and their survival relying on it, they started baking pan (translated to English means bread).

Moreover, every family member joined the business. Their business was booming; the need for more help became clear. They hired workers to help them deliver their baked goods to other communities. The Castillo parents wanted to ensure that their girls played an active role in the daily business and were well protected. They ensured escorts went with them everywhere they went. One of the young men hired was Teodosio Mendoza, a courteous individual with strong farming skills and a shared work ethic. Over time, they proved to have a trusting relationship. Teodosio became

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the head ranch manager and had duties that included escorting the Castillo daughters to town, school, and other social events. The family business ran well for many years. The two Castillo girls also grew to become young misses. During this time, Teodosio (affectionately called Teo) showed his prowess and loyalty to the Castillo family as a trusted, valued community member. Teodosio brought his farming skills to the family and began to grow vegetables on their land.

### **What Was Teo's History?**

Teo was born into a blended family. A Texas family named Zuniga had adopted Teo's father as a young boy. While his father never changed his surname from his birth-given name, Mendoza, his father, grew up understanding the importance of family, trust, community, and the value of arduous work. As a young adult, his father married a woman who had previously married and had a son from that relationship. With this new union, Teo's father did not discriminate between his two sons; only Teo was his father's son by blood. Years later, Teo would remain close to his blended family of origin, and he invited this brother (and his family) to move with his family years later.

### **Where Was the Problem?**

Augustina (affectionately called Tina), the younger Castillo daughter, and Teodosio fell in love. This young couple faced their first life challenge; they were in love and wanted to be together. Teo was ready to commit; Tina was five years his junior. They struggled, in their brainstorming, to produce the best solution. They knew her parents would encourage them to wait, but they did not want to delay. Instead, they crafted a straightforward solution. They would go to the courthouse, get married, and return to her family to inform them of their decision to be together as a married couple and with a new family. Thus, they resolved their challenge and moved forward with their developed plan. They left in the morning and returned home in the afternoon as husband and wife. Fortunately, the Castillo parents graciously accepted their decision and welcomed them home.

Tina's parents knew that the couple loved each other, and while they would have preferred a different solution, they understood. The Castillo parents created a home for the young Mendoza couple on their property. Teo had his aspirations, but now, as a new member of the Castillo clan, he knew he would keep his work commitments for and with the Castillos. He continued to help distribute bread products from the Rizo de Oro

enterprise, knowing his farming skills were growing corn, okra, and other vegetables. The two families, Castillo and Mendoza, continued to live on Castillo hacienda. The families supported each other and held strong family values for church, culture, and community. They lived by their faith and were active community participants. The assets they embraced included truth, resilience, faith, and respect. With hard work and responsible decision-making, they experienced increased success with the land crops and the bakery businesses, but with time comes change.

Tina and Teo grew the numbers in their family; they now have land in Texas. Teo had met other farmers who told him that he needed to buy land with that many sons. With his wife's agreement, Teo began investing in Texas farming land. Teodosio's self-awareness and assuredness in his farming skills gave him a sense of empowerment. This straightforward decision involved only Teo and Tina. With her love and support, they bought land in Texas, knowing that potential change and entrepreneurship could change their close relationship as a family. These purchases suggested independence and a deviation from the Castillo family bakery business.

Meanwhile, by 1910, Mexico was in a state of disruption, experiencing economic, political, and civil unrest. The Revolution War of 1910 was underway. Pancho Villa appeared as an activist and a revolutionist. Teo and Tina Mendoza's 11 sons were now young men entering adulthood. Soon, they would marry and venture out to set up their life pathways. The Mendoza parents felt a deep sense of unease and worry about the safety and political instability in Mexico. Unfortunately, their feared concern became a reality in 1913. The straightforward crisis became a single-focused problem when their 16-year-old son made a spontaneous decision. While making his regular deliveries, their son ran into Pancho Villa and his men. Pancho Villa was passionate in his belief that people experiencing poverty did not deserve abuse by politicians; people experiencing poverty must fight for their God-given rights, and his message was clear: this was the time ripe for revolution.

Young Mendoza listened to Pancho Villa speak and became enamored with the powerful message to support human equality and adventure. At that moment, young Mendoza saw an opportunity to join this revolutionary cause. He instructed his accompanying workers and bodyguards to return and inform his parents that he would not return home; instead, he decided to join Pancho Villa and the revolutionary cause. The workers returned to the hacienda and relayed the message.

According to oral historical accounts, Augustina was the first to receive the message. She notified her husband. Teodosio returned home at once. He knew his son's decision had created a challenge that could alter their

lives forever. His son's immediate danger, juxtaposed with his son's courage and commitment to a value-laden cause.

He feared his son was in immediate danger and sought an expedited decision. Teodosio was fully aware of his responsibility to provide his children with life experiences that prepared them to live through good and perilous times. He, with his wife by his side, had to find a solution that would minimize the danger and enrich his son's adventurous spirit with experiences to become more adroit in facing life and societal problems. The Mendoza family saw the existing larger environmental dangers and changes around them. They knew they were facing a dilemma: overprotecting their children from societal vicissitudes or allowing them to become adults skillfully groomed in problem-solving personal, community, and societal challenges that they would eventually face. The family examined the problem's contextual considerations and identified the problem: "how do we retrieve our son as quickly as possible?" The brainstorming began. One can only assume that Teodosio and Augustina sat at their kitchen table to consider the "how" and "when." As they began to assess options, they consulted the workers who could lead him back to the Villa camp. They said, "yes," encouraging action. He and his wife prepared the strategic plan that called for an immediate but carefully crafted element of surprise to get him out safely. They were encouraged as they identified actions with timelines and decided that it all had to occur without delay. The element of surprise and their faith were their strengths to regaining their son. Teodosio, taking several of his trusted workers, approached the Villa camp. Once they arrived, Teodosio approached his son; they quickly embraced, and without delay, they all returned home. There was a celebration in the home that evening with prayers for thanksgiving.

### **APPLIED SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS TO RESPONSIBLE DECISION MAKING (RDM)**

This section has four objectives: (1) assess important mind-body-spirit/whole person decisions made by these ancestors to show how these decisions affected their lives and study the processes and tools they used to reach the best possible decisions; (2) cite the literature that defines the cognitive, emotional, and sociological perspectives and underpinnings that support effective and efficient problem-solving as decision-making processes; (3) use the important decisions made by our ancestors to show how the cognitive, emotional, and sociological perspectives were considered in reaching responsible decisions; and (4) provide the reader with opportunities to experience problem-solving, including the importance of context, identification of the problem, brainstorming and reality-testing

solutions and consequences, and the encouragement in creating a resolution/implementation plan.

Folkman (2021) followed approximately 47,000 men and 24,000 women to report a special acumen in their ability to problem-solve. He asserted, “8 Consistent Behaviors of Practically Perfect Problem Solvers,” that he called, *360-degree assessments*. Through interviews, peer reports, work peer reports, and observations, he reported evidence that men tend to outperform women in technical expertise/acumen (T-Value 2.276, Sig. 0.023), and women tend to outperform men in the problem-solving exchange (T-Value 2.432, Sig. .015). The study concluded that women outperformed men in the following competencies or behaviors described by category that define “practically perfect problem-solvers”:

1. Self-awareness: takes greater initiative to succeed in problem-solving exchanges;
2. Self-management: shows great potential and truly a role models;
3. Social awareness: invites cooperation of teams in achieving objectives;
4. Relational skills: models and communicates direction and purpose;
5. Self-management: perceptive and quick in identifying problems;
6. Social awareness: inspires people to give their best;
7. Responsible decision-making: goal focused;
8. Social awareness: partners with others to understand the context of a problem;
9. Relational skills: sought after by peers for advice and counsel; and
10. Self-awareness: shares analytic mind with peers.

These self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relational skills, and responsible decision-making literatures support the bridge between human development and *self* to inform the problem-solving and decision-making processes. Bandura (1986) presents the person as an agent who manages social cognitive development influences to life events. Thus, social cognitive development influences and informs the individual’s applied problem-solving development and competencies.

Cognitive, behavioral, and environmental interactions influence the self-agency and directional experiences. For example, a young boy communicating with his father in a potentially dangerous setting involving sheets of metal. The father indignantly shouts, “Pay attention!” When they return to the ground, the father quips, “How many nails do you think we will need to hold the metal down? Get the nails.” Over time, and with earlier experiences (of having to return back and forth for nails), he learns to pay attention to the details, check for safety, and make precise calculations when securing sheet metal nails. He now knows how many nails it takes to

meet the task efficiently. The young man creates a personal remembrance, a mantra, a phrase designed to support his learned investment. “I am a smart person,” he reflects, “I have this.”

### **STONES OF REMEMBRANCE**

Values and beliefs define who we are and who we are becoming. Amidst the backdrop of social upheaval, the Castillo and Mendoza families successfully processed their challenges by adhering to their principles. They lived as individuals and as a family, respectful of themselves and offering that same respect to others. For the Castillo and Mendoza families, church, culture, community, and trusting relationships were core values observable in their daily work, individual problem-solving, and family decision-making. Self-awareness, self-management, and social management, and understanding of relational skills served them well in their complex exchanges as individuals, family, and in community.