

## What is the temperature of your relationships?

**I**t looked to be another gloomy day as Ruth stared out the window of her pickup. Sitting outside the shop this morning, she couldn't shake the feeling of loneliness. Pausing to consider, it struck her as odd; after all, hasn't she worked on a family ranch with her dad, mom, and two brothers, her entire life?



But lately, coming to the shop each morning has begun to feel more like a chore. In the past, they started the day with a meeting over coffee and sometimes somebody would sneak in some doughnuts when mom wasn't around. Her dad loved that! Lately, those meetings have tapered off and she misses the connection. Nowadays, she is lucky to even see her brothers on any given day.

After taking over the books from her mom a few months ago, she has become even more concerned. She has begun to understand why the meetings have dropped off; the ranch is not doing so well. It was right there on paper, in black and white and hard to hide from, but easier to ignore. In addition, tempers had started to flare-up more often in recent months. Her dad was not much fun to be around and it was rubbing off on everyone else.

*She isn't sure how to change things but she hopes to begin today as she grabs a box of doughnuts off the seat beside her and heads into the shop.*

### Relationships

There is never a shortage of things to check off on our To Do list. This is even more true on a family farm or ranch. Families often live where they work, so they never really get a chance to go home or to get away from it all. When life gets busy, family time and relationships often take a back seat and suffer as a result. It can also flow the other way. When the farm or ranch is struggling, so too does the farm family.

Many factors can affect our family relationships. Changes in life situations such as financial struggles, medical problems, parental struggles, and stress (Live Happy, 2021). All of these can affect any family. However, the impact is often amplified when families live and work together closely, as in a family business. A useful metaphor is to gauge the temperature of our relationships. Are they hot and about to explode or cool and relaxed?

### Thermometer vs thermostat

Two different devices are used on a day-to-day basis to gauge temperature: a thermometer and a thermostat. Which are you most similar to in your relationships? A thermometer can read the temperature but cannot affect it, whereas a thermostat can

both read and adjust the temperature. Adjusting conditions to making things either warmer or colder. Just as thermometers and thermostats are quite different, people are also diverse in their interactions with others.

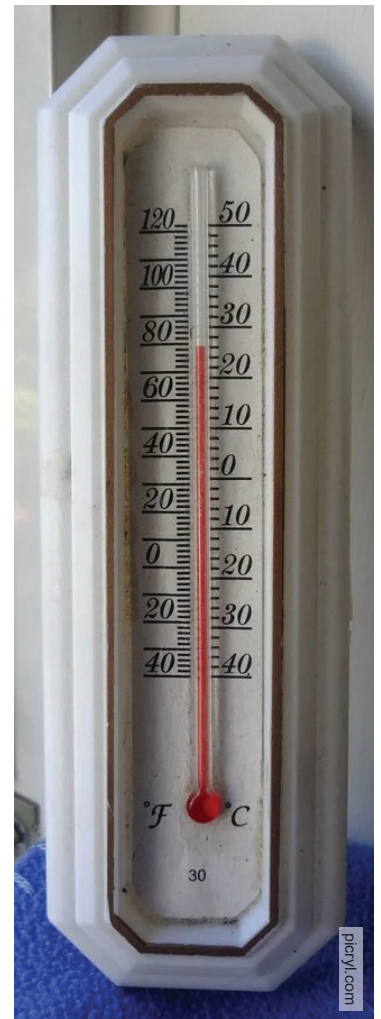
The fact that a thermometer can only gauge the temperature and not affect it may seem negative, but it doesn't have to be. Dr. Thornell explains that sometimes having a little patience and sensing when the other person needs to blow off steam is just what a relationship needs (Thornell, 2021). On the other hand, "A thermostat has the unique ability to adapt the climate to what it needs to be (or what they want it to be) for a given situation."

Have you ever felt like you were locked into acting like one or the other of these devices in a relationship? The good news is that we have the power to be both! We can choose what role we want to play in our relationships. At times, it may be acceptable to take on either role. Accept your role and contribute accordingly. Gauging the temperature is one thing, but improving it can be difficult. There may be times when you simply lack the emotional or mental capacity. Being able to realize that this is the case is also important. If you are taking steps to affect the temperature in a relationship, be extra sensitive to the direction your efforts may be taking it.

## Love languages

One of the most important factors affecting the temperature of our relationships can be the level of communication. Often, when life gets busy, communication tends to suffer. Understanding how to better communicate our emotions and affect the temperature of our relationships is important. One way to improve this is to gain a better understanding of how others prefer to receive love. Gary Chapman wrote a book titled 'The Five Love Languages.' He claims that while we appreciate receiving love in various ways, everyone has a preferred method that is most impactful for them (Better Help, 2021). The five main love languages are:

1. Words of affirmation: These individuals prefer to receive affection in verbal or written forms. It means a lot to them when their partner puts their love and appreciation for them into words.
2. Acts of service: these people prefer to receive affection in the form of tasks or thoughtful gestures. For them, actions speak louder than words. They feel the most loved when their partner does something for them without being asked, big or small.
3. Receiving gifts: these individuals prefer when their romantic partners show affection by gifting items that show they're on their mind. They feel the most loved when they have a tangible reminder of their significant other's affection.
4. Quality time: these people appreciate receiving affection in the form of personal attention and doing activities together. They feel the most loved when they get to spend uninterrupted time with their partner getting their undivided attention.
5. Physical touch: these individuals prefer to receive affection in physical forms. For example, hugs, kisses, snuggling, sexual intimacy, and even a pat on the back or shoulder as their partner passes by are examples of touch that may be appreciated by this type of person.



## The daily temperature check

"Healthy communication helps couples de-escalate a situation, stay calm under stress, use humor appropriately, apologize effectively and make partners feel heard and understood—even during very stressful moments," says Sarah Epstein, licensed marriage and family therapist (McDermott, 2024).

Learning more about our partners love language and understanding how to show them love and affection more effectively is a great way to improve your relationship. Practicing



how to open up and talk together, as well as listening to what the other is saying, is also an important step in improving communication.

Even if you think your communication skills are well developed, check these five steps originally developed by Virginia Satir, a pioneer of family therapy (Council for Relationships, 2023), called the Daily Temperature Check.

The five steps of the daily temperature check include:

1. **Appreciations:** honoring your partner with appreciations and excitements, no matter how small, can create a connection between the two of you.
2. **New Information:** create space for sharing new info, so your partner can receive and share details they may not find time for throughout the day. New information helps to keep each of you up-to-date on what's happening in your life, whether it's something significant or minor.
3. **Puzzles:** this part of a Relationship Temperature Check creates room for exploration, clarification and enhances mutual understanding. This is where you can address real concerns and clear up mysteries before they become false assumptions or resentments. Most problems turn out to have simple explanations and this time allows space to discover those.
4. **Concerns with Recommendations:** as a couple, it's essential to know how to handle complaints, conflicts, and differences without going down a destructive downward spiral or cycle. Can you focus on what your emotional needs are vs. complaining or criticizing? With this step, you can express what you need, validate hearing about your partner's concern and hear more about what each of you hope could become different.
5. **Dreams:** both partners dream and visualize how you imagine your future. Bringing these into awareness is vital for honoring you as individuals and a couple and moving towards fulfilling your mutual and independent dreams.

Some important considerations for helping to make this time effective include: picking a comfortable space, share, listen, and empathize. While it may feel awkward, starting sentences with "I" helps to focus on sharing your own experiences and helps us to remember not to judge.

It is also important to note that the Daily Temperature Check is not a back-and-forth conversation; no resolution or solution needs to be reached for this time to be effective and bonding. The goal is for both of you to listen to and understand one another. The outcome is a stronger and more intimate connection (Thrive, 2021). Though it is called the daily temperature check, it doesn't necessarily need to be done every day. However, checking the temperature on a regular basis is the most effective.



## It's about family, it's about time

The typical family farm or ranch involves much more than the intimate relationship between spouses. It also involves children, grandchildren, and perhaps even other family members. Sometimes, this may include extended family or even hired employees. The skills gained by practicing these methods can also apply to other relationships. It boils down to one important point: expressing appreciation and investing time in others.

We should take the time on a regular basis to let others know that we see what they are doing, that we appreciate their contributions and the relationship that we have with them. We should also remember that spending time together is one of the most powerful ways to ensure they feel appreciated. Remember the adage: families that play together, stay together! Take time away from the farm or ranch as a family to play, relax, and unwind. It will be time well spent and will likely pay dividends for years to come.

## Where to from here?

What is the temperature of your relationships? How are these temperatures influencing your relationships with the rest of the family, the farm/ranch business? What role have you played or are currently playing to influence these temperatures? How can you act as a thermostat to regulate them? After evaluating the current temperature and your role, consider what changes you would like to see. How might you begin to affect that change? Look for opportunities to talk, listen, and show appreciation. Seek out opportunities to better understand other family member's feelings, concerns, dreams and fears. Consider sharing your perspectives and worries with them. Then, with patience, see what opportunities may open up and how things change with a little more frequent and transparent communication.

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