

More Than Dirt: Passing On the Ranch and the Relationships

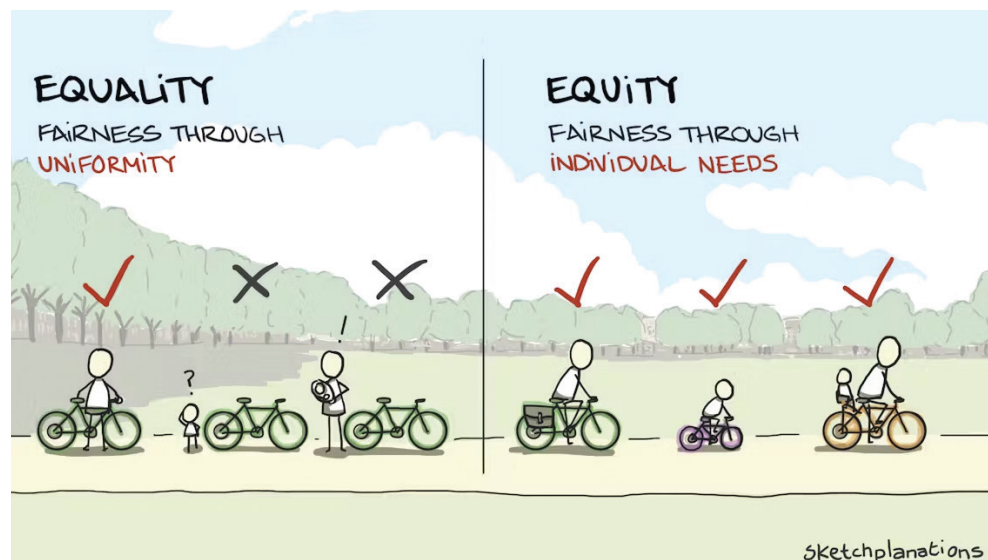
The Thompson family had always been close. Three kids, two parents, and a ranch that had been in the family for three generations. But when Dad said he was ready to step back, something shifted. Suddenly, every conversation turned tense. Who gets the land? What about the tractor Grandpa bought? Why did one sibling get more say than the others? Before long, old childhood fights started to sound like grown-up arguments. Everyone meant well, but no one knew how to start—or finish—the conversation about what would happen to the ranch. It wasn't about money. It was about relationships and keeping the family—and the ranch together for the future.



Planning how to pass down property—both the big items and the little things—is one of the hardest parts of running a family farm or ranch. It's not just about dividing things up. It's about deciding how to carry on the legacy and making sure family relationships survive the transition.

Titled and non-titled property both matter. Titled property is anything with legal ownership papers, like land, vehicles, equipment, or bank accounts. Non-titled property doesn't have paperwork—things like tools, quilts, saddles, wedding rings, or Grandma's butter churn. These items might not be worth

much on paper, but they carry history. If not handled carefully, they can spark just as much tension as discussions about who will get the land or cattle.



Fairness Is Not Always Equal

One of the first challenges families run into is the idea of fairness. What's fair to one person might not seem fair to another. For example, one child may have worked on the ranch for decades, while another

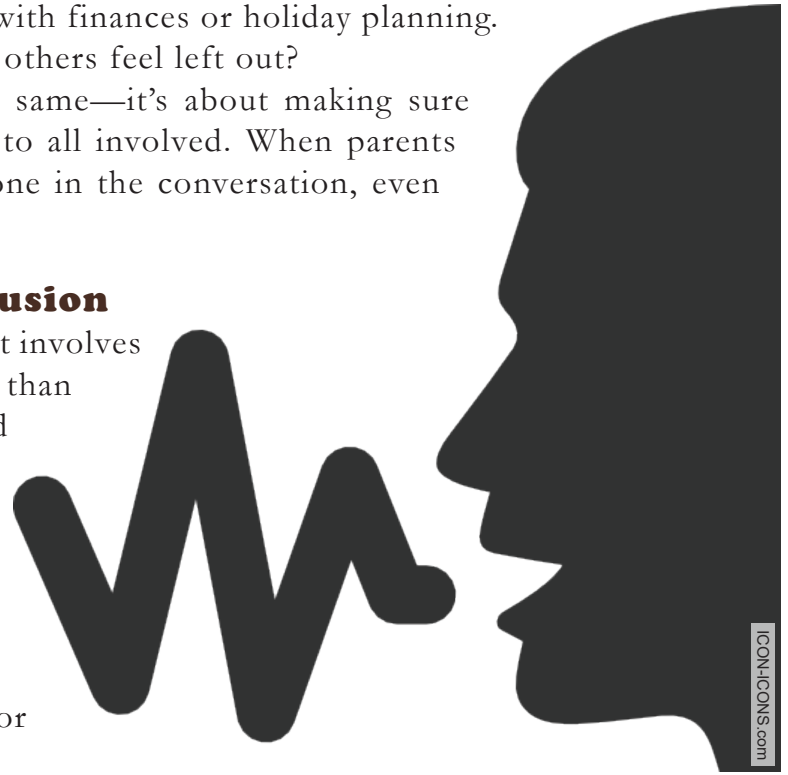
moved to town but remained involved by helping with finances or holiday planning. Should the one who stayed get more? What if the others feel left out?

Fairness isn't about making everyone feel the same—it's about making sure everyone is heard and that decisions make sense to all involved. When parents explain their reasoning clearly and involve everyone in the conversation, even difficult decisions can be easier to accept.

Clear Communication Prevents Confusion

Talking about the future is tough, especially when it involves death or money. But being vague can be worse than saying nothing. Assumptions fill the silence, and people often imagine promises that were never made. That's why clarity matters so much.

Write things down. Make a plan. Don't assume people will "just know" what you mean. The more clearly you state your wishes—whether it's who gets the combine or who ends up with Mom's recipe box—the less chance there is for misunderstanding or hurt feelings.



Talk Early, Talk Often

Starting the conversation before there's a crisis gives families time to think, plan, and talk through hard questions. If someone is already in poor health or under stress, it's much harder to have productive conversations.

That's why early communication is a gift to your family. You don't need to know all the answers. You just need to be willing to talk. And you'll probably need more than one conversation. These things take time.

In order to keep momentum and build understanding, consider holding regular family meetings. Keep them short and focused. Set an agenda. Give everyone a chance to speak. This helps avoid surprises and keeps the process moving forward.

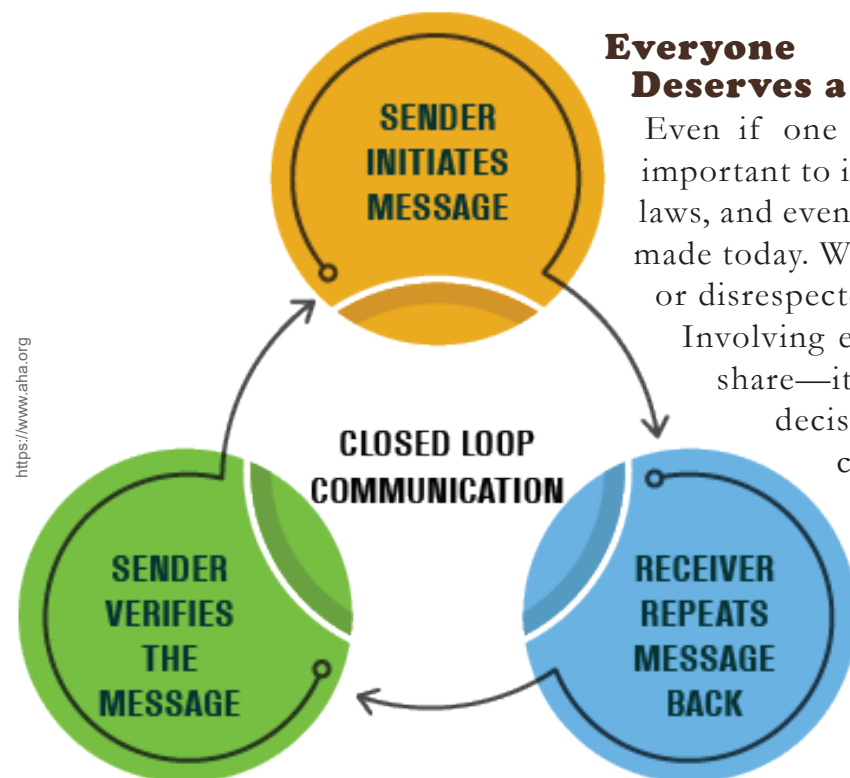
Everyone Deserves a Voice

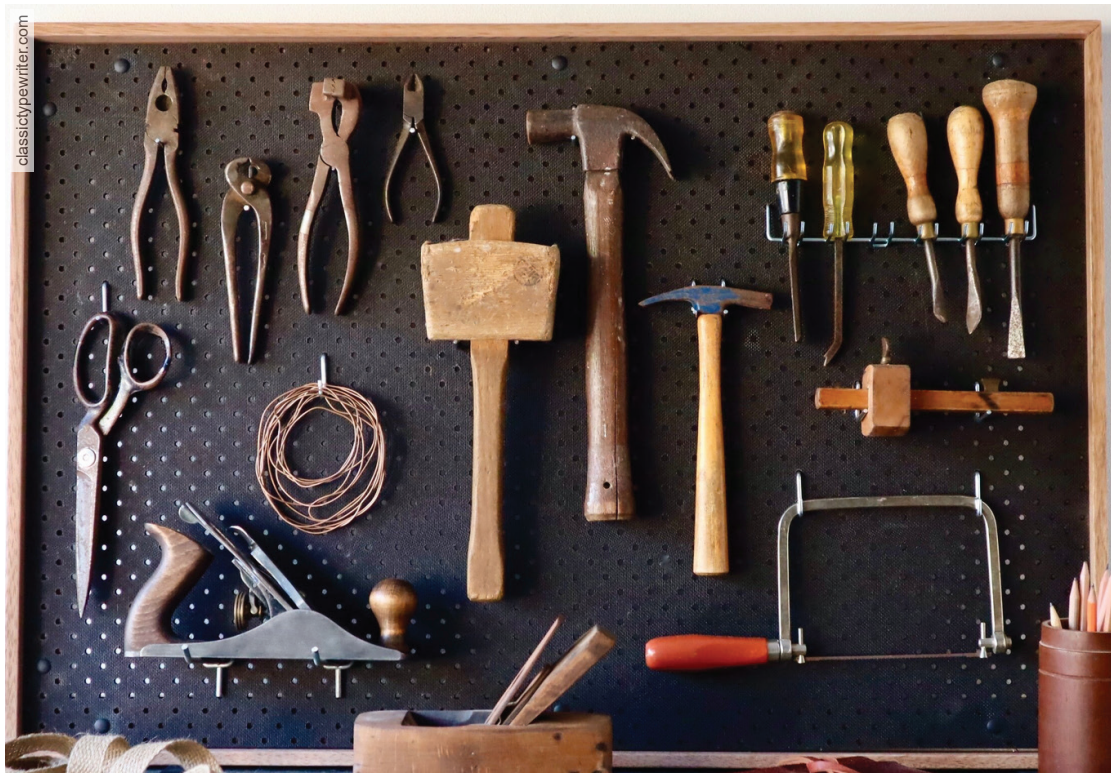
Even if one person is likely to inherit the land, it's still important to include everyone in the discussion. Siblings, in-laws, and even grandchildren can be affected by the decisions made today. When people are left out, they often feel ignored or disrespected. That's when conflict grows.

Involving everyone doesn't mean everyone gets an equal share—it means they get to hear the reasoning behind decisions and ask questions. In most cases, people can accept outcomes better when they feel respected and listened to.

Tools That Can Help

There are several tools that can help you put your plan into action—and using the right ones can make a big difference in how smoothly things go.





Wills are the most common tool. They lay out who should receive your property after you pass away and are legally binding when done correctly. A will can name an executor, assign guardianship if needed, and list what goes to whom. But a will only takes effect after death, and it must go through probate, which can take time and sometimes create delays or disputes.

Trusts can be another useful option. A trust lets you place property in someone else's care—

called a trustee—so it can be managed or passed on according to your wishes. Trusts can help avoid probate, offer more privacy, and allow for more control over how and when assets are distributed. For example, you might set up a trust to pass land to your children but keep it in the trust until they reach a certain age or meet certain conditions.

You can also use **beneficiary designations** to pass on certain assets without going through your will at all. These apply to things like life insurance policies, retirement accounts, or payable-on-death bank accounts. If the beneficiary form is filled out correctly, these assets will go straight to the person listed, no matter what your will says—so it's important to keep these designations up to date.

In addition to these formal legal tools, there are also informal ways to share your wishes—especially when it comes to non-titled property. A **personal property memorandum** is a written list where you describe who should get items like furniture, family heirlooms, or keepsakes. These lists aren't always legally binding, but they're helpful when attached to or referenced in your will. Be as specific as possible—"the antique clock in the living room" is better than "Dad's old clock."

Some families go a step further and create **letters of instruction** to explain the reasoning behind certain choices. While not legally binding, these can help loved ones understand the "why" behind your decisions, which may reduce hurt feelings or confusion later.

No matter which tools you use, it's a good idea to talk to a qualified professional—such as an estate planner or attorney—before making any final decisions. They can help make sure everything fits together legally and clearly. Every family is different, and your plan should reflect your unique values, goals, and relationships—not just what someone else might think is "fair" or "normal."

Closing the Loop

In the end, what the Thompsons needed wasn't just a plan for the land—it was a plan for



staying a family. Once they finally sat down and talked, they discovered that everyone had different concerns, but shared the same goal: to carry on the family ranch in a way that felt right.

They worked with a lawyer to draft a will and a trust. They held two family meetings. They even wrote a short letter to go with their plan—just to explain their thinking. *It wasn't perfect. But it brought peace.*

If you are considering how to distribute your property, remember:

- It's okay to start small
- It's okay not to have all the answers right away
- But it's not okay to wait until it's too late

Talk to your family. Make a plan. Write it down. Also, be sure to seek professional advice before you finalize anything. What works for someone else may not fit your family's needs or goals.



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Ag Legacy Newsletter:
Contributing Authors -
John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

Editing/Layout - John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

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