



Kathleen Peterson

PowerHouse
Consulting

According to Wikipedia, the expression “a chip on the shoulder” comes from the ancient right of shipwrights within the British Royal Navy Dockyards to take home a daily allowance of off-cuts of timber, even if good wood was cut up for this purpose.

The American origin can be traced back to the early 19th century. In May 1830, *The Long Island Telegraph* reported: “When two churlish boys were determined to fight, a chip would be placed on the shoulder of one, and the other demanded to knock it off at his peril.”

I feel quite confident that, today, the phrase “a chip on your shoulder” generally refers not to someone attempting to take more than their fair share of wood “chips,” but more like the second origin of someone looking for a fight. Nowadays there is no visible “chip” on the shoulder, it is more like a virtual chip—a chip that pecks out every kind of perceived wrongdoing or assault on them!

Sadly, for many, the “chip” is alluding to essentially a bad attitude... with a good memory—of every perceived slight put upon them since birth (some may include past lives, as well). The perceived slights is a habit most likely developed in some deep part of the brain that I don’t know about—but we all know it is there. Poor folks who, for reasons unknown, view the world as a sad, bad, hostile place; hence, they are required to gather evidence to support this belief. Certainly this is a problem both personally and professionally. I would like to address the professional impact.

Often, we hear of people bitching because they have been passed over for promotion, or have not been selected for special projects, etc. The more deadly chip carriers are those who are in leadership positions; leading from a bad attitude is largely a dictatorial posture. Demands, accusations, search for the guilty, self-righteousness, frustration, anger and hostility are some of the earmarks of leaders with a chip on their shoulder.

I was at the deli counter the other day getting a sandwich for lunch. Two gentlemen behind me were discussing their boss’s behavior that morning:


“He is so negative.”

“I know. He went off on me again this morning. He asked me to complete the shipment, then screamed at me for the way I did it. That’s it for me! He has such a chip on his shoulder—he is impossible, and I am looking.”

His colleague concurred. These two fellows articulated the frustration that talent experiences when led by a bad attitude—or by someone with a chip on their shoulder.

Talent must be nurtured rather than dictated to from a position of insult and intimidation. Take a very close look at yourself, as the great Michael Jackson pointed out in his hit, “Man in the Mirror.” If your talent is not embracing your leadership, if you must intimidate to motivate, then first it is your responsibility to SEE this situation as yours to correct. That requires an insight that is rarely available to those carrying a chip on their shoulder, which is why each and every leader must at some point conduct a personal inventory. Are you collecting slights to fertilize your chip, allowing it to grow from a chip to a block, to a boulder? If so, the weight of the load will cripple, block or stall your career advancement.

Figure it out! If you are carrying that chip on your shoulder, pick a fight with yourself, wrestle it to the ground and leave it behind. We can’t change the past, only the future. Don’t let your chip oppress your ambition!

“I’m starting with the man in the mirror.” 

Kathleen Peterson is the Chief Vision Officer of PowerHouse Consulting, a call center and telecommunications consulting firm.

✉ kpeterson@powerhouse1.com

☎ (800) 449-9904
