

Leading with A Chip on Your Shoulder

Many leaders mistakenly use anger to prod people to take action. The author calls it "leading with a chip on your shoulder", and he shows why such a leadership trait should be avoided.

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A Marine company commander I knew of had a memorable way of introducing himself to his new platoon commanders. When they first reported for duty, he called them into his office, gave them each a laminated wallet card, then dismissed them without saying a word.

The wallet card read, "Seven Ways to Get Me Angry."

I don't remember what they precisely were, probably standard leadership guidelines like, "You make excuses." "You don't come through on your commitments." "You look out for your career and not the troops."

What's important is not so much their content but the [leadership](#) style they communicated. After all, if after all these years, I don't remember the specific guidelines but the style they evoked, there must be something to remember in that style.

In truth, the list was much longer than seven. He had a hair-trigger temper triggered at the slightest provocation. He was a good leader. His troops accomplished missions. But I believed, then and now, he could've been being better. He could have been better if he had stopped leading with what I call "a chip on the shoulder."

In early American history, people often proved their mettle by putting chips of wood on their shoulders and challenging others to knock them off. Today, a person with a "chip on his shoulder" is angry at the world and daring people to provoke him.

I'm sure you've known leaders who led with that approach. I've discovered that chip-on-the-shoulder leaders usually don't realize their full potential to get results.

There are two reasons for this:

One, getting great results is a matter of having great relationships. Great leadership isn't simply about ordering people to do things, it's about having those people be ardently committed to doing them. Getting people to be so committed involves the cultivation of deep, human relationships between the leader and the people. Great leaders know how to cultivate those relationships. People who have trouble cultivating good relationships in their personal life, often have trouble cultivating productive relationships as a leader.

Clearly, some of the great leaders in history -- Winston Churchill comes to mind -- have had poor relationships with their colleagues and family. However, it's been my experience working with leaders in business, government, and non-profit organizations for the past quarter of a century that great leaders in these organizations have, for the most part, developed and maintained healthy personal relationships. A chip-on-the-shoulder personality trait impedes such relationships.

Two, the chip often becomes the issue, not the results. The Marines often focused on trying to avoid their commander's explosive temper, and focused less on accomplishing the mission at hand.

Look, being a Marine can be a nasty business. Leaders are not in the business of being nice to the troops. Leaders are in the business of having the troops get results to accomplish missions. And that applies to leaders everywhere in all organizations whether they are in a nasty business or not.

But personality quirks often get in the way of results. The seven ways that got him angry were not stepping stones to accomplishing the missions but stumbling blocks. Clearly, they were good pointers; but tying them to his explosive personality demeaned his lieutenants' abilities to take initiative and created extraneous issues.

Finally, if leading with a chip on your shoulder got great results, I'd be writing a book on how to do it not this article on why you shouldn't.

Do you lead with a chip on your shoulder? If you do, take that chip off and kept it off; you'll be a much more effective leader for having done so.

Do you know a leader -- your boss, a colleague, a team member who suffers by carrying a chip around? If you do, you'd be helping them in their jobs and careers by suggesting the same remedy. And the first helping step may be to show that person this article.