
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak

To have an axe to grind



BBC
LEARNING
ENGLISH

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

(Talking over grinding sfx) Hello and welcome to The English We Speak, I'm Neil and joining me is Feifei...

Feifei

Hiya.

Neil

Feifei, can you explain to our listeners why I'm sharpening an axe in the studio.

Feifei

Yes, I can – because in this programme, we've got an expression for you which contains the word 'axe'. It can have three different meanings: 1 - to have an opinion you want other people to accept.

Neil

2 - to be angry or upset about something. to have a hidden plan.

Feifei

And 3 – to have a hidden plan.

Neil

The expression is 'to have an axe to grind'. If you can imagine in the past, if someone did something bad to you, you might want to get revenge – and hurt the person. So you might need a sharp weapon – like an axe!

Feifei

That's horrible.

Neil

In modern use, you can say that someone 'has an axe to grind' but it doesn't mean they're going to attack you with an axe!

Feifei

Let's hear some examples of the different meanings of this expression.

Examples

Oh no here comes Roger. He's got an axe to grind about smoking, so you'd better put that cigarette out or he'll be talking to you for hours about your health.

Don't suggest getting dinner from Yummy Chicken. Jim's had an axe to grind since they fired him last month.

These local politicians have always got an axe to grind. You know they're hiding something from you.

Neil

So, in the first example, the expression 'to have an axe to grind' means to have an opinion you want people to accept. Roger is anti-smoking and he tells smokers just what he thinks of them. He has an axe to grind

Feifei

In the second, Jim got fired by Yummy Chicken so he's upset and angry with the company. He wants some kind of revenge. He's got an axe to grind.

Neil

And in the third one, the politicians are keeping secrets from people. There's something they want to do that they aren't telling you. They have an axe to grind. We should say that this use isn't very common in British English.

Feifei

Well now that's explained, Neil, I think you should put that axe away before someone gets hurt.

Neil

Good idea. It's very sharp now – feel it.

Feifei

Argh! I'll have an axe to grind if you don't put that weapon away!

Both

Bye!