



American Expression E2493 Big shoes to fill

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The phrase "big shoes to fill" is an idiomatic expression that describes the challenge of replacing or succeeding someone who has achieved great success or earned a high level of respect in a certain role. It signifies that the previous person set a strong standard of excellence, making it difficult for the successor to match or surpass that level of performance. The expression conveys both admiration for the predecessor's accomplishments and the sense of pressure felt by the person stepping into their position.

This phrase is commonly used in professional environments when leadership roles or significant positions change hands. For example, when a highly successful CEO retires, their successor may be said to have "big shoes to fill," meaning the organization expects them to maintain or even exceed the same level of achievement. This sets a tone of both challenge and responsibility for the incoming individual, who must prove themselves worthy of the role while dealing with constant comparisons to their predecessor.

Outside of the workplace, the expression applies to many life situations. In sports, a new player replacing a star athlete may be described as having "big shoes to fill" due to the legacy of the previous player. In family settings, a child following in the footsteps of a well-known or highly respected parent may face similar expectations. The phrase highlights the weight of responsibility and the difficulty of establishing an independent reputation under the shadow of great accomplishments.

While having "big shoes to fill" can feel intimidating, it can also serve as motivation for personal and professional growth. The successor may work harder, develop new skills, and demonstrate determination to meet high standards. This pressure can inspire excellence, pushing someone beyond their comfort zone to achieve more than they initially thought possible. It transforms a daunting situation into an opportunity for development and leadership.

However, this idiom also reflects the psychological burden that comes with high expectations. Constantly being compared to a successful predecessor may lead to stress, self-doubt, or fear of failure. It is important for individuals in this position to acknowledge the achievements of those before them while focusing on their unique strengths and contributions. Success does not always mean replicating past performance; it can mean creating a new path that adds value in a different way.

The phrase also emphasizes that achievements are often tied to individual qualities and circumstances. Just as shoes are uniquely fitted to a person, the success of a predecessor may be based on their personal talents, experiences, and timing. The successor can honor that legacy while accepting that their journey will be different, allowing them to bring their own identity and vision to the role.

In conclusion, "big shoes to fill" refers to the challenge of succeeding someone who has left behind an extraordinary reputation or record of accomplishments. It highlights both the admiration for past success and the responsibility of living up to high standards. By balancing respect for the predecessor with confidence in one's own abilities, individuals can embrace this challenge, grow through it, and eventually create a legacy that others will one day describe in the same way.

#### Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of pressure does someone face when they have big shoes to fill in a new role?
2. How can a person establish their own identity while following in the footsteps of a highly successful predecessor?
3. Can having big shoes to fill motivate someone to achieve more than they expected?
4. What are some strategies to handle comparisons with a well-respected predecessor?
5. Are there situations where having big shoes to fill can be more of an opportunity than a challenge?