No Excuses: "Shop Talk"

We were working with a group of factory union workers last week on the issues of diversity and respect. A recurring theme was the issue of "shop talk." The workers argued that such talk -- consisting of sexual and racial profanity and jokes -- comments about women's bodies, and so forth, had always permeated the shop, and that seemed to be enough of a reason for them to continue indefinitely. Labeling the behavior "just shop talk", they seemed to be stressing, insulated their behavior from any responsibility to comply with the organization's policies or values about respectful workplace behavior. The workers seemed to think that this was a special circumstance leading to an exemption from compliance.

The problem is: I've heard the same excuse from lawyers, doctors, psychologists, professors, construction workers and on and on. I'm sure that stone cutters in the Middle Ages were saying the same thing. "This is just the way we talk, it's no big deal, everyone does it. And we're different and therefore exempt."

Sadly, they're not different. I've seen and heard about the same behavior and the same excuses in all kinds of environments.

Look people, it's not written in stone that you have to behave in a certain way. Change does require, however, leaders making the decision to change the culture, enforcing values and polices by their own examples and consequences, and providing effective training for employees.

Last but not least, leaders have to make it clear that they will brook no excuses because having a culture where everyone feels included and treated with respect is worth the pain of change.