

Loose Lips Sink Ships and Can Hurt in Other Ways, Too ¹

“A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it a superficial appearance of being right.” —Tom Paine

Professional positions demand the utmost in discretion. Even an innocent remark made to another professional employee at the wrong time can have dire consequences. Such was the case when Sergeant Dave Ulrich of the Baldwin Village police force overheard a remark at the Montclair Tavern. The Montclair was the natural gathering place for off-duty members of the Baldwin force, thirty strong, as it was only three blocks from the village hall, but it was located outside the village in the city of Granger. Ulrich had grown up in Baldwin, on the same block as Police Chief Hugh Over-beck. They went to elementary school, middle

¹ Thompson and Leidlein. *Ethics in City Hall: Discussion and Analysis for Public Administration*. Sudbury, MA. Jones and Bartlett. (2009)

school, and high school together. Each was very active in school sports and by high school they had become rivals. Indeed they were very antagonistic towards one another. The antagonism only grew as both were rookies on the Baldwin force together. Overbeck was the consummate politician, while Ulrich never held back his feelings, and called a spade a spade, as it were. After 15 years on the force, Ulrich had enjoyed one promotion to the rank of sergeant, while Overbeck had successfully used his cool manner to win support not only for three promotions, but for the achievement of the post of village chief of police. Overbeck was not exactly a good winner in his lifelong competition with Ulrich. As chief, he seem to enjoy riding him, with demerits for miniscule infractions such as having a shirt button unbuttoned or having his hair a bit longer than regulations required. George Slater was elected village president in the fall elections, upsetting a two-term incumbent. He did not learn about the animosity between Ulrich and Overbeck until he had been in office almost 3 months. There was a hostage crisis at Borders Hospital, and Ulrich led the contingent of village officers at the site.

Ulrich personally talked a gunman into a peaceful surrender just outside of the maternity ward. The news media had footage of Ulrich slowly and carefully walking up to the gun-carrying man and talking him into handing over the weapon, after which other officers put handcuffs on the man. It sure appeared that Ulrich had engaged in above-and-beyond duty, and President Slater wanted the village council to recognize him for his brave act. Slater wrote a resolution of praise and it was printed on an appropriate scroll. When the item of recognition appeared on the village board agenda, Chief Overbeck made a visit to Slater's office. Overbeck, in his gentle and suave way, began to describe what had appeared on the news screens of the village and nearby city of Granger as something quite different. He indicated that Ulrich was part of a larger team that went to the hospital, and that it was another officer who had negotiated with the gunman, and that Ulrich was only the one who took the gun away. Slater thanked the chief for the explanation. However, Slater kept the resolution on the agenda, and the village board and the audience at the meeting gave Ulrich a rousing round of applause as he received his

scroll with the commendation. Slater asked the other village officers about the chief's conversation with him, and he was given more details of the rivalry between Ulrich and Overbeck. Slater hoped that the two would outgrow the rivalry or at least that it would be manifested in rather minor skirmishes such as awards and demerits. His hopes were dashed as the hot, humid summer descended over the Midwestern village. Gail Wahr was the county district attorney. He had just been elected by the largest margin in history. All eyes were on Wahr, as people had him pegged to be a future congressman or maybe attorney general or governor. He was a rising star. Wahr was an activist and a go-getter. He was a no-nonsense crime buster. Wahr also socialized with county law enforcement staff. At a social occasion, he was tipping drinks with Susan Gill. Susan worked for the child welfare division, and discussion turned to child molesters. "Talk about headaches," Wahr exclaimed, "We have a doozy." He then said he couldn't talk about it, but it was close to home, and some county people were going to feel it when it came out. The drinks kept coming, and Gill was anxious to find out more about

what the district attorney had said. He kept brushing her off, but then casually said the matter involved a police officer in the county sexually assaulting his 13-year-old daughter. Gill had a boyfriend, Tom Van Buren, who just happened to be the bartender at the Montclair Tavern. Susan came in regularly. She happened to come in right after the county social gathering. While she waited for Van Buren to get off work, she had a few drinks. In the course of the drinking session, she said, "D.A. Wahr is investigating charges that a local policeman is molesting his 13-year-old daughter." These were loose words, not loudly said, but nonetheless they reached the nearby ears of Ulrich. He heard them clearly, one time. That was enough. It was like a sledgehammer that had been raised over his head for 3 decades came down crushing against his skull, leaving him seriously wounded but still on his feet and still able to strike back. Strike back he did, first verbally, then with threats, and finally with a rush out the door, proclaiming that he was going to the village hall to kill the chief. It happened that Ulrich had a 13-year-old daughter. Before he left, he was screaming, "That bastard, first he tries to demote me ... he's tried to

fire me ten times, but now he's going after my family, my God! Accusing me of molesting my daughter. How low can a person go? I'll kill that bastard!" Then he grabbed the telephone and called the village police office and repeated his ranting, all of which were peppered with the most gross of profanities. Tom yelled at him to put the phone down. "You're not calling the police line are you?" "Damn right I am." "But Dave, it's all recorded," Van Buren replied. Ulrich answered, "I don't give a f---," and he continued his diatribe. As Ulrich left the Tavern, Van Buren quickly phoned the police station to warn officers that Ulrich was coming, and to make sure the chief got out of there safely and quickly. Fortunately, the chief had left for the day, so Ulrich's antics at the police station just consisted of more verbal tirades, filled with venom and more profanities. After Sergeant Ulrich left, the chief was contacted, and a patrol car was sent to make sure he was safe. The police also kept general track of Ulrich. Luckily, he decided to go home. The next day, the word spread rather quickly around the village hall. The chief called Village President Slater and asked that he gather the village clerk and treasurer for a quick

meeting. He added that it was a personnel matter, so they didn't have to worry about the state open meetings law. The chief and a deputy brought the village officers the telephone recordings. They were devastating. All at the meeting were stunned. What should they do next? A very delicate call to a person in the know at the district attorney's office confirmed that an investigation of the type referred to was indeed taking place. However, the object of the investigation was a county deputy who was assigned to the corrections division—the county jail. The D.A.'s remarks had nothing to do with Sergeant Ulrich or Chief Overbeck. Nonetheless, the rivalry of Ulrich and Overbeck had to come to an end. President Slater said what all knew—it was a very unfortunate situation, but Ulrich's police career was probably at an end. However, Slater did not want to rush to a decision. He felt that Ulrich deserved that they not judge him hastily. Slater proposed that Ulrich be put on immediate 2-week leave, with full pay. That would give them all time to consider the right steps to take. Friends of Ulrich within the police force were able to get the truth to him, so that he knew that the chief had never accused

Ulrich of any seriously improper or illegal behavior. Ulrich wasn't going to apologize, but he let his friends know that he had lost it, and he wasn't mad at the chief, and that he had acted inappropriately. The chief had a member of the force who was a good friend of Ulrich visit his home and request his gun. This was done peacefully. The next week, a sporting goods store that sold merchandise to most amateur teams in the village of Baldwin and in the city of Granger made a offer to hire Ulrich as a salesman. Ulrich had been very active in amateur and youth sports. The store owner was a friend of his. He took the job and informed the village that he intended to retire. Ulrich was able to retire with a clean record. The village officials made a solid mental note of what had happened, but as far as any record went, the books were closed. Ulrich was in no mood to seek another law enforcement position, and he did not do so. Ulrich did not have any kind of formal retirement party, but his friends did gather around him at the Montclair Tavern to offer support. When the village recreation program needed supplies the next summer, the director made sure he placed an order with Ulrich.

