

4TH TRAINING SEMINAR OF THE OAFCN

“Deterring Fraud by Informing the Public”

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Transcription

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I can speak as someone who has followed OLAF since it was born, and who has accompanied its growth over a period of four and a half to five years, so I know how important it is, and have the experience of seeing how important it is, that, where possible, the best kind of communication of information and relations with the media exist. Now that's easy to say, but when one knows someone, who, as I say, has been closely associated with this development, the complications that there have been, not only in the creation of OLAF, but in the process of building it up into what it is today, are such that it is almost impossible to communicate in a simplistic way, which is often necessary for good communication.

I think, and I have to be fair in saying this, that OLAF has tried and continues to try, successfully in certain areas, less so in others, but that is a fact of experience.

The media and relations with the media are not what they used to be. When I was a young detective in Scotland Yard, and we used to travel out of London for serious investigations, there was a group of reporters and media people who were known and specialised in the work of crime reporting. And these specialists would accompany us, they would stay in the same hotel, each evening we would drink the same beer together and we would discuss what happened during the day, and we were able to say to these professional crime reporters, “*Well, here is the full story, but you can only publish this, not the rest.*” And the relationship between the investigators and the crime reporters was such that, if one of those crime reporters published something which we had said he should not publish, he would be excluded from any communication in the future. Now that was a nice, easy, simple arrangement, and it almost worked on a family basis.

That's no longer possible. It's no longer possible because media communications are different, and furthermore the public perception is different, and you are now in the business of communicating information.

Strangely enough, the public is not interested in honesty. People are much more interested in dishonesty, and when you have an Office dealing with subjects like dishonesty and corruption, it's normal, indeed expected that they will be the subject of a great deal of interest.

So OLAF has always been an easy target, and especially when a new organisation, which has been founded and is developing itself and building up its own structure and system, is an easy target for the people looking for the kind of sensational information that is available.

And therefore for you, trying to find the balance between how you give something which can be of interest as opposed to giving information that in the end should not be communicated, or which it is not in anybody's interest to communicate, becomes a very difficult game.

The other part about it is too that we all know that different journalists, different media representatives, are all in competition with each other – who can get the best story? They will resort to all kinds of means to obtain the information they want.

We know - and OLAF has been to a degree a victim of this - that there are people willing to give information, for all sorts of reasons: they may be personal, they could be financial, that is something against which it is difficult to take preventive action as well, and so seminars of this kind are absolutely essential if one wants to communicate to the public the kind of information you think they should have.

One of the things I've always been convinced of is that if you can explain to the public what you want to do and what you're trying to do, and that what you're doing is in their interest, then, generally speaking, the response will be positive. But that doesn't mean that, at the very slightest indication of something which can be criticised, they will not jump in and take notice of that.

I agree certainly with some of the recommendations that Mr Fazakas just made; this relationship between investigators, journalists and so on is something which has to be addressed, and it's true also that in relation to transparency, it's better to give as much as you can, obviously without prejudice to an investigation. There is perhaps – and particularly in the context of the European institutions – a tendency to overemphasise confidentiality. It seems to me, and my experience has been over the last four years here in Brussels, that it is extremely difficult to keep anything secret in the institutions. Somewhere along the line, information gets out, even suspicions which may not even be confirmed as suspicions become the subject of rumour and so on, so in that situation, it's probably better to give as much information as you can, with due respect for confidentiality and so on. So, I regard this kind of seminar as particularly important, and I know that Mr Buttice and his colleagues have done their best to make it interesting.

I said earlier on, and I'll conclude with this, that basically people are not much interested in honesty. There was a very good TV programme the other evening about the career of a German banker, who was asked on one issue whether he had collaborated with other members of the banking community, who could have been interested in a certain project. And he said, "I have to tell you that I have a certain difficulty in finding the right kind of people, who have notions of honesty the same as mine." He also said it is probably because honesty cannot be calculated in money terms, and if it can't be calculated in money terms, then it's of no interest.

So we are dealing with an area such as this which deals with ethics, with morals, also with issues of incompetence, and all these things make the work of OLAF extremely difficult. Therefore there is this necessity of explaining the positive aspects of what they do, and there are very, very many. We in our Committee see that we have struggled with them to make sure that things are put in place, work and so on, and finally, after many delays at the beginning, because it was difficult – even the appointment of Mr Bruener as Director took some considerable time, and his directors and so on – but now I can confirm, on the part of my Committee, that things are certainly now moving very, very quickly towards the establishment of what is becoming every day more and more efficient in terms of an anti-fraud office.

I wish you well in your work and have no doubt at all that the product of these seminars – and this is the fourth one – that finally we shall begin to see the good elements of what is happening.

Thank you very much.
