



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin - Demotion and Subsequent Positions

Description

A summary of Inez Austin's demotion and subsequent positions.

Body

On October 11, 1990, Inez Austin filed an official complaint of on-the-job harassment with the United States Department of Energy (DOE). Almost two months later, on December 4, she agreed to drop her complaint in return for a number of concessions: a new job, a month off with pay, removal of a letter of reprimand (concerning the incident in which she did not certify the pumping procedures) from her file, removal of other derogatory information from her file and compensation for her attorney fees. Seemingly, the trouble would be over there. She was allowed to choose her new position, and decided to move to West Tank Farms Operations (WTFO). However, she was unable to receive any assignments there, being told by her new boss that he had been ordered not to give her any work. Any work she did was on a strictly volunteer basis. This continued for nearly three years; during that stretch, she was not invited to meetings and any work she did was usually duplicated by someone else. Austin was actually demoted on October 1, 1993.

Again, Austin was being tested. She was being paid for doing nothing, but that did not sit well with her. So she took drastic steps. Just six days after her demotion, on October 7, she called a news conference and informed the press that in the nearly three years since her settlement with the DOE, she had received no assignments.

From that point on, she was assigned work. In the next year, she worked under four different managers. In that time she was sent to Environmental Compliance Officer (ECO) school, but when she returned to WTFO, another individual had been given the ECO position. Austin protested on the basis of her job being part of her earlier settlement, and eventually she did get the ECO position.

However, now that Austin was actually doing work, she became an even greater target for harassment. Dave Reber became her boss on November 10, 1994, and that event was the beginning of the end for Inez Austin.

Prudence might dictate that Austin avoid controversial issues, especially after what had happened to her since 1990. During 1995, she found herself working on many controversial issues. Hanford practiced the unlawful policy of allowing untrained workers into certain restricted areas. They also covered up an asbestos spill, a caved-in road at a contaminated site, and also went through some questionable procedures regarding pumping excess liquid from one of their tanks. It was not difficult to figure out what would happen if someone, especially Inez Austin, fought management on any of these issues.

But her integrity was important, too. So she pushed for what was right, and eventually paid for it. Between the lack of support and/or harassment she was receiving from most of her superiors, and the pressure and harassment from those colleagues who either wanted her job or just wanted her out, it seemed to be just a matter of time before Austin was squeezed out of her job. It finally happened on February 28, 1996. After returning from a week's vacation, she was informed that her job had been posted during her vacation, and that she was officially fired.

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Topics

Whistleblowing

Employer/Employee Relationships

Public Well-being

Environmental Justice

Discipline(s)

Nuclear Engineering
Engineering