



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin - Circumstances Leading to Austin's Greatest Challenge at Westinghouse

Author(s)

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Description

Inez Austin and Westinghouse refusal to sign documents about safety.

Body

As one of the few female engineers at Westinghouse, Inez Austin consistently received excellent ratings for her work. In 1989, after ten years with the company, she was transferred from her position as an engineer in charge of calibration records to a new position as senior process engineer. Part of this job was approving safety procedures regarding the pumping process for millions of gallons of highly radioactive wastes, including ferrocyanide. Austin was also a member of the Readiness Review Board, a Hanford task group that makes such certifications on the safety of cleanup procedures.

In June 1990, Austin was requested to propose a document that would certify the safety of pumping these dangerous liquid wastes out of five single-shell tanks in order to stabilize the tanks. The July 1 deadline for pumping these tanks was fast approaching; as part of the [Tri-party Agreement](#), a thirty-year cleanup program reconciled by the DOE and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the pumping issue required immediate attention.

Austin's primary concern involved two of the five tanks which contained extremely volatile amounts of ferrocyanide. In October 1989, the U.S. Senate had assessed that this presence of ferrocyanide could be highly explosive under specific conditions and thus had to be pumped dry to prevent a possible explosion. There were several relevant studies on the matter that were due to be completed soon; one of Austin's alternatives was to simply delay pumping the tanks until it was clear whether there was any danger or not.

Nevertheless, Austin created a proposal that adhered to safety principles regarding pumping procedures by recognizing the necessary cautions. Unfortunately, her warnings were cut out of the report by her boss, Richard Kimura. Then, the report was returned for her signature of approval on June 25. At this time, Austin had not yet seen how Hanford traditionally treated whistleblowers. But she had to realize that some people would be angry if she refused to sign the report. The question was: How much integrity did Inez Austin have?

Austin refused to sign. After feeling pressured to sign the document once again, Austin felt discouraged and resigned from the Readiness Review Board on June 27. However, by following principles of ethical conduct, Austin was harassed and threatened, rather than being recognized or commended for her safety and health concerns.

Rights

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