

Summary: Alleged Favoritism by an ONRR Supervisor

Report Date: February 15, 2017

We investigated allegations concerning a relationship between an Office of Natural Resources Revenue (ONRR) supervisor and one of his subordinates. We found that while the relationship did not seem to violate standards of behavior for Federal employees, it did create the appearance among ONRR staff that the supervisor had given his employee an unfair advantage in a hiring action and intentionally assigned her fewer projects than her coworkers. Finally, both the supervisor and the employee falsely denied, to ONRR officials and initially to us, that they were in a relationship.

We opened our investigation after the U.S. Department of the Interior's designated agency ethics official reported to us in 2016 that her office had received allegations that the supervisor was romantically involved with a subordinate. The allegations also stated that after the relationship began, the supervisor selected this employee for a promotion to a position under his supervision. Furthermore, the complaint alleged that the employee was unqualified for her new position and that once she was promoted, the supervisor showed favor to her by assigning her a smaller workload than her colleagues.

Our investigation found that the supervisor and the employee began dating in the fall of 2015. Shortly thereafter, the supervisor selected the employee for a promotion to a position that was one grade level higher than her previous position, and he became her direct supervisor. We determined the position was competitively advertised and found that the employee was qualified for the promotion.

We learned, however, that the supervisor, who was a selecting official for the position, did not disclose his personal relationship with the employee or recuse himself from the hiring board. This may have created the perception that the employee had received an unfair advantage during the hiring process. We also confirmed that the supervisor appeared to show the employee preferential treatment by assigning her significantly fewer cases than her colleagues.

In addition, we found that during a 2016 internal inquiry ONRR conducted into these same allegations, both the supervisor and the employee denied being in a relationship. Their lack of candor during the internal inquiry caused ONRR to determine that the allegations of favoritism were unfounded. They also initially failed to disclose their relationship to our office when we interviewed them, although they admitted to it during subsequent interviews.

This is a summary of a report of investigation that was issued to ONRR.

