

A Review of *Grand Intentions*

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Abstract: *Grand Intentions* by Trevor Barr is an exciting read that involves many themes and works at many levels. It concerns a fictitious telephone company, Telco One, which is undergoing major change as the Government privatises it. Telco One is in the throes of moving from a traditional culture based on public sector, even public service, values to a commercial entity subject to the overwhelming imperative of shareholder value. The twists and turns as Telco One transforms from its previous culture into a dynamic commercial entity are transfixing. This is a must-read book for those with an interest in what could become a dystopian drama if not for the emergence and re-emergence of grand intentions and praiseworthy aspirations of the characters themselves.

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Review

This is the first work of fiction by Trevor Barr, a professor emeritus from Swinburne University in Melbourne who has taught and written about communications themes for a life-time.

Grand Intentions (Barr, 2016) involves many themes and works at many levels. It concerns a fictitious telephone company, Telco One, which is undergoing major change as the Government privatises it. Telco One is in the throes of moving from a traditional culture that is based on public sector, even public service, values to a commercial entity subject to the overwhelming imperative of shareholder value.

The board of directors is as rent by demands as diverse as those affecting the organisation. The Board determines that change must start at the top and retains international recruiting consultants to scour the field. The existing Australian CEO is not even short-listed. This is how the underdone chairman, Nathan Thompson, meets the preferred candidate – even the only candidate – Clint Mason. (Yes, the international recruiters have duded the Board. Happens a lot.)

The story that unfolds will resonate strongly with those who have followed the recent fortunes of Telstra, Westpac, Consolidated Press and other companies that have sought to transform themselves though importing overseas – and especially American – chief executives. The story will

resonate even more with those who have been in organisations subjected to this brand of short-term radical transformation.

Trevor Barr seeks – and largely succeeds – to present the complications that accompany radical organisational transformation. He does not treat the matter of cultural clash in the simple terms that some might consider appropriate. There are many complexities to be teased out.

The story is told at many levels as the different paths of a range of characters become entwined and their values play out. Most really do have grand intentions to do good, at least in their own terms, or to achieve something that is better than whatever they have started with. There is Clint Mason, the New Yorker, who has a track record of organisational change in the telecommunications industry in the United States and is recruited after an international search (which sounds like a search that was poorly specified and executed) as the CEO of Telco One. There is not a lot to like about Clint – who is clearly modelled on many imported managers with a shallow draft and a determination to apply the methods they have adopted in the United States to anything they find abroad. Trevor Barr has nicely caught Clint's unswerving belief in the superiority of anything from the United States and its application anywhere else in the world. Clint is not interested in the organisational culture that he finds himself in, or even in the broader Australian culture that he has temporarily joined. He is a superior person. One exception is with certain aspects of indigenous culture, but this is left as an inexplicable exception in the novel. For Clint, most of what he finds has no utility other than as a surface to paint over.

Reminiscent of other foreign CEO takeovers, Clint brings with him a team of compatriots – not all at once, but over the journey. The most conspicuous is Brad Botein, a hatchet man from way back, and his Australian deputy from the beginning of his term. Clint Mason takes little time to remove many of the incumbent senior managers, especially those who appear not to immediately accept his so-called vision for the company – or those who do not immediately “get on board”. New senior managerial recruits also include Australian managers who are attracted by material rewards – not all are American. The slash and burn redundancy program is rolled out very quickly.

In stark contrast to Clint Mason, Brad Botein and recent senior appointees, is the long-serving head of Customer Relations, Gordon Hunt. Gordon also has grand intentions, and has had them for over thirty years. Prior to Clint's arrival he employs two non-telco people who are professional counsellors – Paul Brookes and, at Paul's insistence, his long-time friend and fellow counsellor, Max Groves. Gordon Hunt is trying to develop new ways of engaging with customers, especially given that old ways of doing so are clearly not working. The level of complaints is steadily rising. He is responding as well to the recent highly publicised death of an asthmatic, Thomas Bowie, when the continued poor performance of a residential telephone service meant that emergency medical help arrived too late. This incident recalls a real-life similar situation not so many years ago for Telstra. It seems that large organisations may not be motivated to act in any effective way except in response to highly publicised and dramatic situations such as this. Grand intentions are only part of a corporate response when accompanied by trauma of an extended kind – such as the enquiry and public outcry following Thomas Bowie's death.

Paul and Max are very motivated to change Telco One into an organisation that truly engages with its customers and starts by listening carefully to what they have to say. They recommend to Gordon

that a Consumer Advisory Council be established with representation from all major consumer segments. Gordon takes the idea up, and Clint agrees.

There are many parallels between the appointment of Clint Mason as CEO and of Paul Brookes as counsellor. In both cases they are insistent that their associates be appointed with them. Trevor Barr does not take this particular parallel further, but it does provide opportunities for dialogue between like-minded people, which might otherwise have been difficult to credibly cover in the third person. It is interesting that the author has noted a tendency to select teams, even teams of two in the case of Paul and Max, to undertake transformative projects.

The relationship of Telco One to its customers is contrasted with the relationship of a community radio station with its listeners and supporters. Max's partner, Karen (Kaz) is made station manager in difficult circumstances knowing that the money is about to run out. The station appeals to its supporters and listeners and raises a relatively large amount in pledged support through a radiothon. But its hand to mouth existence is set to continue. It is a band-aid at best. But the engagement is real and reciprocal.

To say more about the way that the situation unfolds, at various levels, would be to give away the plot. Not that this is crime fiction with potential surprises towards the end. Clint Mason's vision, including the substantial human suffering associated with mass redundancy programs, has consequences. And these become clear as the story continues. At the level of the individual characters, one might be surprised by the turn of events in the novel, but what happens is to be expected.

Trevor Barr has a good ear for the industry and for the way in which issues are expressed. If there was a failing in this novel – and I am not saying there is, mind you – it is that the characters not only talk the same language they often sound like each other – even the Americans. They often adopt each other's tone. Their collective favourite conversational gambit is "So tell me about it" and sometimes "So, tell me the top three things about it". This is not a problem if, like me, you learn to count back to whoever is last named and work out who is speaking from that. It only works if the characters take turns to speak and if there are only two of them.

Trevor Barr's substantial experience is on display through each of the characters in the novel as they grapple with issues that confront them. He particularly picks up on the phoney nature of a lot of "management speak" associated with conveniently massaged visions and passions. It contrasts with the need for real engagement with people. There is a scene in which Clint runs a CEO forum for over 650 Telco One staff in a large facility, extended via links to cover State capitals. Clint runs his mantra on vision and convinces himself that he has responded well to questions, but the reality is somewhat different.

Grand Intentions is an enjoyable novel, with many messages. Perhaps some will be more discernible to people who are in the telecommunications industry. Or who might have been, before being made redundant. It is fiction with substantial messages that transcends the characters and the specific situation of Telco One. Globalisation and technological progress have human costs and serve to increase the difficulty of engagement between people in traditional ways. How the challenges are addressed is important. Clint Mason's way is via disconnection and reconnection to the short-term imperatives of shareholders. Others in the novel want to cling to the past. Others want to be guided

by changing customer preference. All approaches are underpinned by personal characteristics that add to complexity. Personal relationships add to the stresses at all levels.

The world that Trevor Barr is describing as coming into being could easily become a dystopia, were it not for the emergence and re-emergence of grand intentions and praiseworthy aspirations of the characters themselves. The title might be sardonic, but it is the source of hope that improvement is possible.

I commend this novel to you.

References

Barr, T. (2016). *Grand Intentions*. Melbourne, Australia: Sid Harta Publishers