

Givers Gain: The BNI Story

First Things First

I already know why you're holding this book in your hands. It's because you've become a member of an organization that you feel pretty good about—an organization that has grown from one chapter to thousands in 20 years because it has earned a reputation as a potent business-getter for the independent businessperson.

I also know that not too many people can tell you how this came to pass. It's true that many of BNI's current members and leaders have been here a long time, some even from the beginning. They can tell you their own personal history in the organization, because many of them were the first BNI members and leaders in their part of the country or the world.

But none of them can tell you, from a single viewpoint, exactly how it all began and how it got to be the organization you see today. That task uniquely falls to me, because I'm the founder. And it's not really a task, because I enjoy telling stories. Many of my friends and colleagues will attest to that, and usually they're polite about it.

More and more over the last few years I've become aware that it's not only a story that I'd like to tell, but one that needs to be told.

Until now, nobody has written down the whole story, or even tried to tell it in more than generalizations and anecdotes. Truth be told, telling the full story out loud would require an audience equipped with monk-like stoicism and flanks of iron. That's why books were invented.

In the pages that follow, I'll try to recount for you, as succinctly and vividly as I can, how BNI sprang into existence and how it became so large and successful in so short a time. This won't be the whole story by a long shot—but I hope it's enough to give you the picture, the sense, and the flavor of the fine organization that you've joined.

One of the secrets of our success is that BNI is made up of a lot of people who bring talent and skill and dedication to the job. BNI is not built on me, or on Norm Dominguez and me, or on Don and Nancy and Martin and Gillian and Connie and Dan and me. It's built on all of us, leadership teams and 600 directors and tens of thousands of members and a lot of support people.

And yet—if you add up all these people and their time and dedication, it still doesn't account for what BNI has become. When you write out the recipe, the ingredients don't quite add up.

It's a familiar mystery. BNI is a classic example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Every one of us adds something good and positive and significant to the organization, but when the recipe is put together and cooked in a unique way, the result is far beyond anything you might expect. BNI has taken on a life of its own, creating results in surprising ways and in surprising places.

I think one reason BNI is so much greater than the sum of its parts because the parts are encouraged—more than encouraged, they're trained and exhorted—to interact with one another. The key to the effectiveness of networking is forming relationships based on trust in an atmosphere of generosity and selflessness. And this is the key to BNI's organizational health, as well. The only competition among members is a friendly scuffle to see who can do the most good for others. That's constructive competition.

Inspiration shows itself everywhere, and it too is shared. Our directors are among the most skilled and innovative organization leaders in the world, and they are not shy about expressing their opinions on how BNI could be made more effective and its members more productive. But in an organization composed top to bottom of business leaders, no one has a corner on the idea market. I would estimate that three-quarters of the most useful ideas occur to a director, or to me personally, after one of us sees something new being tried in a chapter meeting that might work well in all the other chapters.

This collective creativity is awe-inspiring. I get a lot of satisfaction watching this great assemblage of minds create its own “Eureka!” moments, over and over again. And unlike many other organizations, BNI has a central philosophy that encourages the sharing of good ideas. People say to each other, “Hey, this has worked well for me—you should try it!”

Aside from the unpredictable synergy of philosophy and function that characterizes BNI, there are other factors in its phenomenal growth, factors that are common knowledge and certainly no secret to successful people. One of them is the art of making decisions.

Someone I respect once said to me, “Look, Ivan, not every decision you make has to be right. You just have to make more right decisions than wrong ones. And when you realize you’ve made a wrong decision, you’ve got to fix it quick.”

This is a wonderfully comforting thing to hear, especially for a person who never intended to create a worldwide organization with a life and a mind of its own. What if we take a wrong turn? Will we suddenly find ourselves on the rocks?

I’ve made my share of wrong decisions, but I’ve learned to correct them quickly. On the whole, my advisors and I have made a lot more right decisions than wrong ones. The essential thing is to make decisions. Deciding not to decide is always the wrong decision.

Another factor is the quality of the people that are attracted to BNI. Because the up-front philosophy of BNI makes receiving secondary to giving, you won’t run across many selfish or self-absorbed people. You’ll find very few members who are pessimists, naysayers, or dyed-in-the-wool cynics. The negative types tend to weed themselves out. It’s tough to commit to something you’re not wired to believe in.

What you *will* find is members and leaders who are wholeheartedly positive about life and generous toward others. If they get down in the dumps about anything, it’s about not having enough time to do everything they want to do for their families, their

businesses, their fellow BNI members, and anyone else who crosses their path. Their altruism is rather daunting; among people who are naturally competitive, the competition becomes who's tops in doing things for others.

What you read in the pages that follow will be a quick history of BNI from the first glimmer of inspiration to its full flowering as a global organization. But I don't want this to be a dull recitation of names and dates, or a geography lesson, or a collection of charts and graphs, as impressive as any of those pieces might be on its own. Instead, I want to show you the thinking—by me and by others—that went on behind all the big decisions and actions. At heart this is a fully human story—not just my story, but the stories of scores of other thinkers and leaders and business owners who are the driving force behind our success.

For that reason, I'm going to ramble a bit. I'll tell you what we were thinking and when, who was involved, what we decided and why, what we ended up doing, and what we learned along the way. Like Old Grandpa on the front porch, I'll tell you some stories that are slightly shaggy but that you may find entertaining or educational—or even both.

In the last chapter I'll sum it all up by telling you about the things we consider to be BNI's traditions. Some of these—most of them, probably—you will have gathered from the history chapters and the anecdotes embedded in them. But in the final chapter you'll get a better picture of how these traditions work together to make BNI not only a powerful business tool but a uniquely effective force for good.

Most of all, I hope that when you finish reading this book you'll have a bird's-eye perspective of BNI to go with your experience of its day-to-day, week-by-week functioning at the chapter level. You already know that you've joined the world's most successful referral networking organization. You probably have your own stories to tell about the good it's done for your business. Now you will know how it got that way.

So . . . pull up a chair, get comfortable, and let the story begin.