

Fireside chat: Industry Executives

“Rising Tide” | 2026 Annual Business Conference
June 15, 2026 | 7:45 am – 9:00 am

Description: Join industry executives for an insightful discussion on the future of the plumbing and heating industry. This panel will examine the key challenges shaping today’s market, from shifting consumer preferences and workforce pressures to rising costs, supply chain uncertainty, and geopolitical factors. Panelists will share how their organizations are responding while growing customer value.

MODERATOR

Satinder Chera
Chief Executive Officer, Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating (CIPH)

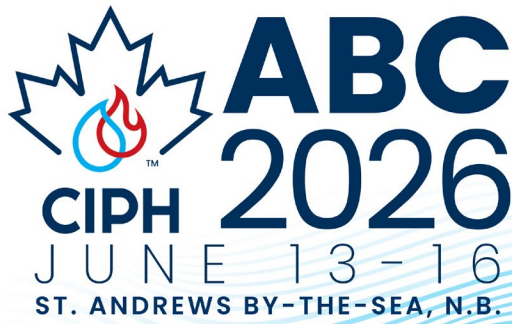
PANELISTS

Alana Stevens,
Chief Executive officer, North America, BLANCO



Alana has extensive experience working across design, marketing, and manufacturing within both B2B and B2C commerce.

She is currently the CEO North America for BLANCO, a premium provider of German- designed residential kitchen solutions. BLANCO is renowned for their signature SILGRANIT sinks, award-winning design heritage, and ongoing innovation in the kitchen water place category, now including Drink Systems. BLANCO’s North American customers



are served from a production facility outside Toronto, and distribution warehouses in Ontario and New Jersey.

Prior to BLANCO, Alana held various roles in the furnishings industry; most recent roles being President of Knoll at MillerKnoll, Inc. and SVP/Chief Marketing Officer at Knoll, Inc. Throughout her career, Alana has energized businesses by driving design and operational excellence, and the cultivation of high-performing teams.

Alana also serves as strategic advisor, board member, and leader within her community. A native Canadian, Alana is a graduate of McGill University (BA) and Harvard Business School (MBA). She now lives in New York City with her family and yappy dog.

Mike Branson

President, Global Air Division, Rheem Manufacturing Company



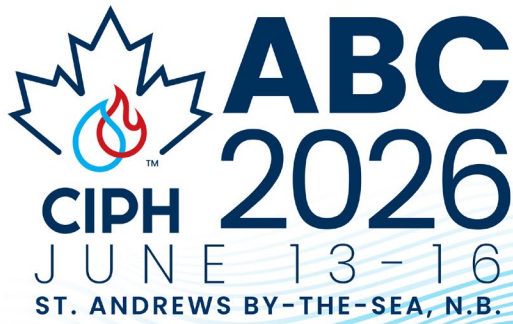
Mike leads Rheem's Global Air division which includes Rheem Canada Limited (RCL), Rheem Air Distribution (RAD), Rheem Middle East and Africa (RMEA), and General HVAC Solutions America. He has worked in the HVACR and Plumbing industry for nearly 30 years.

Mike joined Rheem in 2010, initially leading advanced technology and then product strategy for the Air and Water businesses before becoming the GM for the US air conditioning business in 2014.

Throughout his career, Mike's leadership responsibilities grew steadily in the areas of general management, marketing, sales, brand management, product development, and engineering. Prior to Rheem, Mike has experience in HVAC wholesale distribution, with another HVAC OEM, and in automotive. He also served as an officer in the U.S. Navy as a Naval Reactors Engineer. Mike is the current chairman of the Air-Conditioning, Heating and Refrigeration Institute (AHRI).

Mike earned both master's and bachelor's degrees from Purdue University in engineering. Following graduation, he attended the U.S. Navy Direct Commission Officer Indoctrination school in Newport, Rhode Island.





Kim Rutherford
Director, National Vendor Relations, EMCO Corporation



Kim began her Emco career in 2002 working as an administrative assistant in the Toronto Waterworks profit centre. She later transitioned into customer service, followed by progressive roles in operations and national pricing, where she developed a passion for supporting customer needs and aligning business strategies. Kim went on to serve as the Procurement Manager for Emco's Waterworks and Plumbing divisions and was promoted to Director of National Vendor Relations in 2017.

In her current role, Kim works closely with Emco's teammates and business partners to facilitate long-term collaboration and alignment. Kim is actively involved with CIPH through her service on the IDEA, and Membership Committees, contributing to initiatives that support inclusion, equity, and accessibility across the plumbing and heating industry. As someone who is deaf, this work is both personally meaningful and professionally important. Kim is a co-creator of Women Inspiring Women, a group focused on providing support, mentorship, and a safe space for women in the industry.

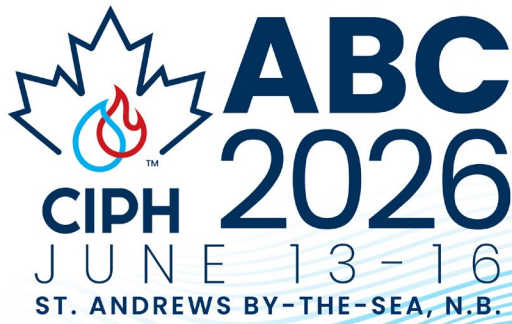
Outside of work, she is married with two children, Jack and Claire, and enjoys Disney- particularly Disney cruises, as well as spending time with her family at their trailer.

François Deschênes,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Deschênes Group Inc.



François is President and CEO of Deschênes Group Inc. since early 2017. Previously, he had been Vice-President Operation for the province of Quebec, Vice-President and General Manager for Deschênes & Fils Ltée, a subsidiary of Deschênes Group Inc., Vice President Marketing & Business Development, as well as Vice-president Procurement.

He joined the family business in 2000. He had also been president of the plumbing and heating buying groups AD Canada Plumbing & Heating Division and Canaplus Limited Partnership.



After carrying out two training assignments in Deschênes Group companies, he completed a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration at HEC Montreal in 1994. He then held various positions in the manufacturing industry and started a multimedia company in 1997. He holds an EMBA degree from McGill-HEC Montréal since 2010.

He is a member of the Young President's Organization (YPO), the Cercle des présidents du Québec and the Boards of Directors of the Canadian Institute of Plumbing and Heating (CIPH) and of AD, North America's largest marketing/buying group for construction and industrial supplies.

Andres Castro

President and General Manager, A.O. Smith Enterprises Ltd.

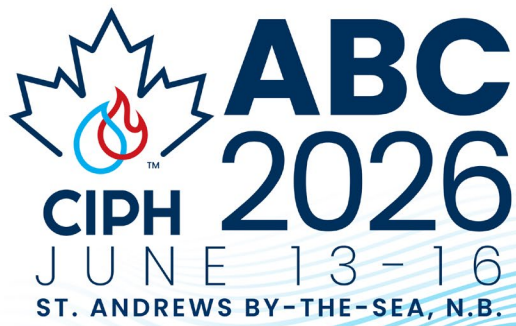


Andres Castro is President and General Manager of A. O. Smith Enterprises Ltd., where he has full enterprise accountability for the Canadian business, including strategy, P&L performance, sales and marketing, operations, manufacturing, supply chain, finance, human resources, engineering, and customer service. He leads with a clear mandate to deliver profitable growth, operational excellence, and long-term value creation.

Andres is a seasoned global executive with cross-industry leadership experience spanning automotive, HVAC, advanced manufacturing, construction, and building supply products. He has held senior leadership roles across domestic and international markets, consistently building resilient organizations, strengthening market positions, and driving performance through both growth cycles and periods of disruption.

Known for his strategic rigor and execution discipline, Andres brings deep expertise in enterprise transformation, operational excellence, capital allocation, and stakeholder engagement. He has led complex, multi-function organizations with unionized and non-unionized workforces and is recognized for fostering strong governance practices, ethical leadership, and high-performance cultures aligned with long-term business objectives.

He holds a Bachelor of Science in Engineering and Business Administration from the University of Manitoba and is an alumnus of Harvard Business School, where he specialized in strategy and



leadership. Trilingual in English, French, and Spanish, Andres brings a global mindset shaped by extensive international experience and a strong appreciation for cultural nuance in leadership and decision-making.

Beyond his professional responsibilities, Andres is committed to community involvement and lifelong learning. He enjoys international travel and engaging with diverse cultures, as well as sports, the arts, music, and reading. He lives in Ontario with his wife, Susan, and their two sons, Matias and Lucas.