

# AIST <sup>2025</sup> Leadership CONFERENCE RECAP

BY AMANDA WOODS

Representatives of AIST's leadership gathered in Scottsdale, Ariz., USA, for the 20th rendition of AIST's Leadership Conference. The event is designed to enhance the value of participation in AIST activities and provide resources to help members grow within the association and the steel industry. In attendance were officers within AIST's 22 Member Chapters, 29 Technology Committees, Board of Directors and its standing committees, and the AIST Foundation Board of Trustees.

The conference kicked off on 18 November with a selection of team-building activities at Saguaro Lake Ranch, followed by a welcome reception at The Scottsdale Resort and Spa. The business portion of the conference commenced the following morning with a welcome from AIST's executive director Ron Ashburn.

He provided attendees with an overview of the state of the North American steel industry. Comparing steel production across the globe, he noted that U.S. steel production — currently fourth in the world — is on track to surpass Japan for third place.

Ashburn also explored the issue of overcapacity, which is “entering record territory again,” he said; as well as trade investigations, tariffs and planned investments in the U.S. There is currently US\$44 billion worth of private CAPEX investment underway.

Brian Bliss, general manager — technology for AIST, gave attendees a review of AIST's Strategic Plan, which is comprised of four initiatives:

- » Membership Retention & Growth.
- » Technology Training & Education.

- » Globalization of Networks & Programs.
- » Next Generation Workforce Development.

Bliss reviewed goals, benchmarks and activities relevant to each of the four initiatives.

Stacy Varmecky, general manager — operations, gave an update on the trade school outreach initiative, which grew from an idea conceived at a previous AIST Leadership Conference.

Her presentation discussed the U.S. Department of Energy's Industrial Systems Energy Efficiency Development (ISEED) Collaborative, of which AIST is a participating member with its Steel to Students Program.

John Ball, general manager — commercial, provided an update on an initiative to change the public's perception of the steel industry.

“The industry has evolved over the past decades ... the perception has not,” Ball said.

Also an idea that sprang from a previous AIST Leadership Conference, this project is intended to create a marketing plan that will shift the narrative to steel as a high-tech, sustainable and essential material.

Next up was a presentation from Chris Kuehl, managing partner and co-founder of Armada Corporate Intelligence. Kuehl gave an in-depth yet broad analysis of the economy. His analysis included remarks on global manufacturing, which after a strong showing in August, had slumped in September, but was trending upward again in October. He also reported that gross domestic product in the third quarter of 2025 was growing at 3.9%, up from its forecast growth of 1.6%.



Ed LaBruna moderated a panel discussion titled “Forging the Future: AI’s Impact on the Steel Industry — Realities, Trends and Lessons Learned” (L-R): Paul Thurber, Steffen Klawitter, LaBruna, Gianluca Maccani and Chenn Zhou.

Following Kuehl’s presentation was a session titled “Air-It-Out,” where conference attendees were asked to provide their questions, comments and concerns for AIST to evaluate. An essential part of the Leadership Conference program, this segment fosters conversations that often lead to improved processes and new program offerings from AIST.

Wrapping up the first day of the conference was a panel discussion titled “Forging the Future: AI’s Impact on the Steel Industry — Realities, Trends and Lessons Learned,” with Ed LaBruna of Janus Automation serving as the moderator. Panelists included:

- » Steffen Klawitter, head of digital service operations and chief architect, Siemens Digital Industries.
- » Gianluca Maccani, chief technology officer, Polytec North America.
- » Paul Thurber, senior vice president of sales, Everguard.ai.
- » Chenn Zhou, NIPSCO Distinguished Professor of Engineering Simulation; founding director, Center for Innovation Through Visualization and Simulation; and founding director, Steel Manufacturing Simulation and Visualization Consortium, Purdue University Northwest.

This panel aimed to explore real-world applications of Artificial Intelligence in steelmaking as well as in other industries. Each panelist presented on their insights as to how AI can benefit steel production and what are some of the implementation challenges and the measurable benefits that AI has delivered across different parts of the value chain. Following the

presentations, the floor was opened for questions from the audience.

Day 2 started with a Leadership Perspectives conversation with Wendell Carter, retired executive vice president of technology, Cleveland-Cliffs Inc.

Carter, an AIST past president and venerable industry iron expert, fielded questions from Ron Ashburn about his life, career and thoughts on the state of today’s steel industry.

“We have the land of opportunity in front of us right now,” Carter said, referencing the millions of tons of planned capacity that major domestic steel producers are putting into action.

“The problem is, we’re going to be full. We should be able to manage that capacity, but people have been predatory to our country. We’re still operating at only 75, 80%. It’s going to be more competitive.”

In giving advice to AIST’s next group of leaders, Carter said, “You’re making a difference whether you realize it or not. We were beleaguered during my presidency; we were facing 20 million tons of imports coming in from China every year.”

“You are in tremendous hands looking at where this organization is today. The ability to fund over 50 scholarships for young people to enter our industry — that doesn’t say we’re declining or on the down hill. We’re rising. And it’s amazing the value that AIST has brought, and you will remember your days here with fondness.”

Three separate breakout group discussions followed, for members of Technology Committees, Member Chapters and the AIST Executive Committee.





Brian Bliss and Anna Voss, manager — technology programs, led the Technology Committee breakout discussion. Leaders of AIST's 29 Technology Committees shared successes their groups have had with maintaining membership, attracting new members and getting producers involved. More than 30 chapter officers and committee members from 13 of AIST's 22 Member Chapters participated in the Member Chapter roundtable, facilitated by Jill Liberto, manager — member chapters. The roundtable offered officers a collaborative forum to review the newly established

financial oversight policy, consider the proposed Memphis Chapter framework, exchange best practices, and address annual operational priorities.

After lunch, attendees enjoyed a lively round of the AIST Steel Pursuit trivia game. The AIST Board of Directors then met at the conclusion of the conference.

AIST wishes to thank Premier Sponsor TMEIC; Event Sponsors Baltimore Aircoil Co., Berry Metal Co. and SuperBooth; and its many event contributors who made the AIST Leadership Conference a success.







Left photo: Ron Ashburn (L) presented 2025–2026 AIST president Al C. Behr (R) with a framed photo of the June 2025 issue of *Iron & Steel Technology*, which features his photo on the cover. Right photo: Ashburn (L) presented Wendell Carter (R) with a plaque of appreciation for participating in the Leadership Perspectives segment. ♦



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