

# VISTAGE

## Member *Stories*

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Bill Gray, President  
Uponor North America  
Apple Valley, Minn.

### *At a glance*

**Role:** President

**Industry:** Manufacturing

**Employees:** 650

**Vistage chair:** Wayne Serie

### **Company background**

*[Uponor, Inc.](#) is an award-winning provider of plumbing, fire safety, radiant heating/cooling, hydronic piping and pre-insulated piping systems for residential and commercial applications worldwide. In 2015, the company received the Governor's Safety Award for workplace safety and health and also was named a Top 150 Workplace by the Minneapolis Star Tribune. Uponor, Inc. employs approximately 570 people at its North American headquarters in Apple Valley, Minn.*

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Uponor president and Vistage Minnesota member Bill Gray is truly living the life of a global executive. Bill is a dual United Kingdom and Canadian citizen living in the U.S. leading Uponor's extensive North American operations from Apple Valley, Minn. Oh, and he also "commutes" to Europe at least 10 times a year where the company has its global headquarters in Finland. The company is public and listed on the NASDAQ QMX stock exchange in Helsinki, Finland.



Amazingly, Bill still finds time to attend his monthly Vistage meetings with chair Wayne Serie.

Uponor is an international market leader in plumbing and indoor climate products and solutions. The company is well known for high-quality and highly-reliable systems and products. Bill moved to the U.S. in 2011 from his Canadian home to take a job as VP of sales, which eventually led to his current position as president of Uponor's North American operations.

The company has about 650 employees in North America—more than 575 are in Apple Valley and Lakeville, Minn. Uponor has strong market presence in residential housing bolstered by an enviable network of professional plumbing and heating distributors that love its products. Its core offering has long been innovative plastic pipe (PEX) made by crosslinking polyethylene. More and more contractors and engineers are using the product to taking advantage of lower material and labor costs than more traditional copper and steel pipes.

While Uponor has long been known for its residential market penetration, Bill says, “We want to drive to the commercial space.” And that’s already happening; Uponor has installed its under concrete heating systems to keep surfaces free of snow and ice at the new Vikings stadium in Minneapolis. Uponor’s plumbing products are also used in the new stadium. Bill says, “Our hearts are in heating, but the majority of our company’s revenue comes from plumbing.”

### **“Vistage wants you to succeed”**

Bill has been a Vistage member for about a year and looks forward to the monthly meetings when he has the chance to ask for feedback from fellow CEOs and senior leaders in his group of 15 members. “It’s safe. The conversation is with people who don’t have skin in the game so they don’t have any interest in one outcome or the other. I feel that people are genuinely interested in helping me do better,” says Bill.

In addition, Bill says the one-on-ones with Wayne are great because of his chair’s challenging questions. “I think Wayne is a really good chair who challenges you through questioning to help you understand the different perspective or see things differently,” he says.

The monthly presentations from Vistage speakers have also left an indelible mark on Bill. So much so that he wants to share the speaker content. “One of the things that I want to do going forward is to involve more of my senior people in the presentations that are done,” he says.

### **Uponor’s strategic challenges**

One of Uponor’s biggest concerns is finding people to replace some of its more senior employees who are in the retirement corridor.

“We’ve got a few of our manufacturing supervisors, first level supervisors, who are in some phase of a three-year retirement cycle,” he shares. “Right now, our leadership is focused on building the company’s next generation of leaders, especially in the company’s manufacturing area,” Bill says.

Compensation is a sensitive issue in manufacturing so Bill does his homework to make sure he doesn’t lose good people to companies offering better pay than Uponor. “How do I keep our people if a neighboring company offers a few cents more per hour?” he says. For some of these questions he has turned to Vistage for the answers. Bill says that all the company leaders in his Vistage group, including chair Wayne Serie, have dealt with the same issues and challenges. That advice is priceless.

Bill also credits monthly Vistage speakers with sharing ideas and concepts he can usually put into practice immediately and see results. He cites a speaker that addressed the group on issues regarding the hiring and managing of millennials, a topic of keen interest for Bill. “Really, I haven’t seen a bad or poor speaker,” he says.

Vistage has also been a great sounding board for another challenge Bill is wrestling with: how to strategically protect your company from factors beyond your control, such as a housing crash or declining revenue streams from some customer segments. On the flip side, he’s trying to figure out how to advance his company’s products and services to capitalize on new technologies and paradigm shifts, such as digitalization and the Internet of Things.

“As we progress and have these discussions down the road or want to investigate those, I think my Vistage colleagues are going to be very useful in challenging my plans and assumptions or at the very least be a great point of reference.” **V**