



Throughout their careers, NCOs train soldiers on a variety of topics. Here, two top trainers offer their views on effective training.

Army's best trainers on training:

Preparation is key

By Spc. Jimmy Norris

So you just got “hey-you’ed” to give a class. You know this stuff; you do it every day. So why do you have sweaty palms and a lump in your throat? Because in that instant, you’re visualizing the blank stares of a classroom full of soldiers as you begin to pontificate on the rewards and gratification of the Oil Exchange Program.

Now as you begin the class — reading the task, conditions and standards from your portable dry-erase board — you notice the glazed looks in the eyes of your soldiers. They’re already glancing at their watches. They’re expecting yet another dull class. Signs of life have already begun to drain from their faces, and in another five minutes they will have tuned you out completely. What they don’t know is that you’ve taken some tips from top Army instructors on how to give a class guaranteed to keep them awake while teaching them the required material.

Two NCOs — Staff Sgt. Randy Cheadle, the Army Drill Sergeant of the Year, and Master Sgt. Kevin Keefe, the TRADOC Army Reserve and National Guard Instructor of the Year — share some of their secrets to the elusive art of dynamic instruction.

The Army’s top drill

Cheadle spent 18 months at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., where he trained more than 1,000 of the Army’s military police during their combined basic and advanced individual training. He currently conducts assessments of Initial Entry Training instructors and advises the TRADOC commander and command sergeant major on all drill sergeant and IET matters.

Keefe has taught engineering military occupational specialties for seven years to more than 2,400 soldiers as the regimental training instructor for 1st Engineer Battalion, 164th Regiment, North Dakota National Guard.

“We all remember what it’s like to be on the other side of the podium in a boring class,” said Keefe. “As instructors

it’s our job to make sure that doesn’t happen. You can do that by knowing your material and being prepared. If you’re not prepared, you’ll lose your audience.”

Keeping classes interesting

According to Cheadle and Keefe there are a number of ways to keep classes interesting, but they agree the first step is preparation.

“We have to take it upon ourselves as NCOs to properly plan and execute training,” Keefe said. “Make sure your class and training aids are prepared. When you’ve got that all locked and cocked you’ll be more confident and better able to focus on the actual training of the soldiers.”

Preparation includes putting together a lesson plan, establishing the task, conditions and standards and conducting a risk assessment. But before any of that can be done, there’s an important first step instructors often overlook, said Cheadle.

“Getting the right person to teach the class is crucial,” he said. “For example, I’m an MP. Military police have a number of different specialties such as [working with canines] and [military police investigators]. Since I don’t have a background with canines, I would be the wrong person to teach that class.”

Granted, Cheadle said, an NCO will sometimes receive a task to teach a class on a subject that he has no experience in. But the situation is far from hopeless.

Knowing the material

“The instructor must know the material,” Cheadle said. Preferably he should have experience with the task, but if he doesn’t have experience, he can gain it through field manuals and training manuals, Cheadle added.

After learning the material the instructor should put together the lesson plan. Keefe said while there are a number of steps that should be included in creating a lesson plan, such as identifying the task, obtaining the references

and resources and studying the material. There is no one proper way to do it.

“It’s all up to the trainer. Whatever works for him, as long as it meets the standard, is okay,” he said. “What might work for me may not work for the next guy.

Another factor in good training is obtaining the proper training aids.

Having the right ‘toys’

“We call it ‘having a toy for every boy,’” said Keefe. “If you’re giving a class on land mines and you have 30 students, then you need to have 30 land mines. That way the soldiers can learn by doing.”

Having realistic training aids prepares soldiers for the conditions they’ll face in the field, and makes training more interesting, said Keefe.

There are, of course, times when training aids are simply unavailable. That doesn’t mean training stops. “If you don’t have the materials and the training aids, you have to relate your experiences on the battlefield to the soldiers,” said Cheadle.

But lesson plans and training aids are only part of the preparation needed to conduct a successful class. Cheadle said one of the most common mistakes trainers make is failing to rehearse the class.

“Rehearsal is very important when giving a class,” he said. “You can do it with the section chiefs and other NCOs in your unit. It gives you a chance to find out if there are any gaps in the lesson plan, such as missing information. It also allows him to prepare for any questions that may come

up. The middle of a class is the wrong time to find out you missed something.”

After planning and rehearsing comes the actual delivery of the class. According to Field Manual 25-101, Battle Focused Training, there are three methods of delivery — lecture, conference and demonstration. Each of these can be used alone or in any combination.

Lecture is generally used in a classroom environment. During the lecture, the instructor presents information with little or no discussion. “I talk; you listen,” explained Keefe. While sometimes it may be the only available method, Cheadle said the lecture is the least desirable of the three methods. “It makes the [people] being taught feel uninvolved, and it’s hard to keep their interest,” Cheadle said.

When an instructor does have to give a lecture, Cheadle suggests using training aids to help hold the students’ interest.

Using the conference format

Another method of delivery is the conference format, which involves a discussion between the instructor and the students.

“I talk; then I try to get you to talk back,” said Keefe. It can be an effective form of instruction when soldiers already know something about the subject or when there is more than one correct way to do things. Military occupational specialty and NCO professional development training are two examples of training using the conference method.

“It’s useful because you can get feedback from the students and find out how far along they are,” Keefe said.



Master Sgt. Kevin Keefe (left) goes over the workings of an electrical panel with a student.

The third, and most preferred, method of instruction is demonstration, according to Cheadle.

"I'm done talking, now I'm going to show you," said Keefe. "I can explain all I want about how to assemble an M-14 multi-purpose firing device, but you'll never understand until I show you."

"Demonstration is the most effective of the three because you're leading by example. By showing your proficiency in a task you can motivate a soldier toward success."

To Cheadle, leading by example is one of the most important factors in being a good trainer. "I mentor my soldiers most by leading by example. When soldiers see their drill sergeant put on [Mission Oriented Protective Posture] gear and run around checking soldiers, they know we're not above the standard — and it motivates them."

Even after the instructor has given the class, demonstrates the task and delivers the lesson plan — one important step remains.

Checking up afterward

"You can lecture and demonstrate all you want, but you'll never know if a soldier understands unless you do a check on training," Cheadle said. A check on training is a means of getting feedback from students. An instructor can get feedback by asking the students questions about the subject or by administering written or hands-on tests. Feedback provides the instructor with the information he needs to decide if the students need more training, and on which tasks.

Both Cheadle and Keefe said they are passionate about training soldiers, and they love doing it. But it's not without its challenges.

Personality differences, a lack of training aids and environmental difficulties are just a few of the creative challenges instructors may face when giving a class.

"Most of the challenges we have training soldiers involve tasks soldiers don't want to learn," said Cheadle. "For example, putting a soldier in all of his MOPP gear for four continuous hours has an effect on both the mind and the body. My job as an instructor is to help soldiers understand how it will keep them alive on the battlefield. Having the soldiers understand why



Staff Sgt. Randy Cheadle, the 2002 Drill Sergeant of the Year, coaches a soldier on firing the AT-4 anti-tank weapon.

we're training will help them want to achieve the standard."

The students themselves present many of the challenges instructors face. The solution to most of these problems seems to be flexibility.

"Different soldiers react to different leadership styles, and you have to change your leadership style to accommodate each soldier," said Cheadle. "What I do today to motivate one soldier may not work tomorrow with another soldier. Sometimes you have soldiers who are capable but unwilling. Other times you have soldiers who are willing but incapable. Yelling may be effective with one soldier and discouraging to others. I've got to constantly evaluate the soldier I'm dealing with and adopt a leadership style to suit the situation. Leadership is not a theory or a concept. It's a way of life, and how well you react to changes defines your character."

While many of the challenges in training soldiers come from the soldiers themselves, neither instructor believes there are any untrainable soldiers.

"In the drill sergeant world, we have the concept that there are no untrainable soldiers. We utilize the investment strategy — we will give every soldier the time and opportunity to excel through counseling, teaching, mentoring and coaching," said Cheadle.

Keefe put it even more simply.

"You can make them want to learn if you're dedicated enough," he said. "You have to be willing to spend time with the soldiers, even if it means doing it during your off-duty hours and help them learn the material. As an instructor and as an NCO, if you don't want to take the time to help soldiers learn, you're wrong."