Press Release

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TRUST training helps to build effective 10th Mountain Division teams at Fort Drum

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – Since 2019, Soldiers across the 10th Mountain Division (LI) have benefited from a training program that improves their communication skills as they practice teambuilding activities.

The TRUST (Teamwork, Respect, Unit Strength Training) course is taught by Bill Van Orman, Suicide Prevention Program coordinator, and Tom Wojcikowski, Family Advocacy Program specialist, both with the Fort Drum Soldier and Family Readiness Division.

Van Orman said TRUST was designed as discussion-based, hands-on instruction for team and squad leaders to strengthen interpersonal communication skills.

“I think Soldiers are good at Army communication, but they aren’t taught good interpersonal communication,” he said. “The skills they are frequently taught are more direct communication, but not as much indirect. But the type of communication we teach is the kind that will help them identify what’s going on in a Soldier’s life. It gives them the tools and techniques to talk with their Soldiers in a more relatable way that builds trust.”

Van Orman said that interpersonal communication is a diminishing skill in the age of smart devices where people rely more on technology to pass along information.

“I don’t say this to be judgmental, but there is a generation that has grown up typing and texting as a means of communication that we didn’t have,” he said. “I see it in my own kids sometimes. So, I think that has stolen some of our communication skills, and that’s what we’re working to build again.”

Wojcikowski said they discuss risk factors and warning signs that relate to issues of suicide or domestic violence, and how Soldiers can talk candidly to each other to identify problems they may be having.

“When they know how to talk to each other and build a level of trust, then they put themselves in a position where they can help each other,” he said. “They realize, ‘I was able to get them the help they needed because I was able to talk to them and learn something about them where I could identify a potential problem or issue.’”

Wojcikowski said, throughout the class, Soldiers learn different communication techniques and how to break common communication barriers. Those lessons are reinforced in practical exercises where Soldiers apply those skills in pairs and small groups.

One task required teams to build a structure without any open ends from 50 pieces of PVC pipe in 15 minutes. The instructors observed how Soldiers communicated with each other, who took charge and who opted to be more passive, and how competitive they were in finishing the challenge.

“With the hands-on exercises, there’s a lot of communication pieces to it that they can apply,” Wojcikowski said. “And you can see right away that the Soldiers are thinking about them. But at the end of the day, we ask them how they are going to apply what they learned a month from now? How will they take what they’ve learned today and continue to grow?”

While the morning session is for team and squad leaders to hone their skills, the afternoon session is like the final test – to see if they can lead their Soldiers through an obstacle course where communication is key to success.

“Not only do we want them to put those communication skills to use with their Soldiers, but we want them to give their Soldiers the opportunity to take charge,” Van Orman said. “Then we can see how well the team leader can serve in more of a mentorship role.”

On Oct. 17, roughly 60 Soldiers from D Company, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, completed that challenge.

“I thought the training today was very useful,” said Cpl. Hunter Gilbert, team leader. “It creates good teambuilding and communication skills with everyone ranging from the private level up to squad level.”

Gilbert said that starting the morning with small group activities among team leaders, then building up to squad-level challenges on the obstacle course emphasized the importance of effective communication on different levels.

“I learned a lot just talking and working amongst my peers in the classroom,” he said. “And then coming out to the obstacle course with my Soldiers and my fire team, we learned to cooperate and communicate with each other to accomplish the mission.”

Gilbert said an infantryman is always moving in the field, going from one objective to the next, which means they also are always communicating.

“Communication is one of, if not the biggest, issue we can always improve upon,” he said. “You can yell at somebody, but that doesn’t mean they’re understanding you. So better communication will always make the team better.”

Sgt. Joshua Akers, squad leader, said TRUST training reinforced the need to always be improving.

“I came in kind of thinking I knew how to communicate well, but then I realized I have a lot I can work on,” he said. “But this training helped a lot. I’m very much a hands-on learner, so being able to see how the way you communicate can impact the success or failure of the mission was great.”

Capt. Dustin Hicks, D Company commander, said this was the right time for his Soldiers to receive teambuilding training following recent unit restructuring.

“These guys need opportunities like this to get to know each other better and work on their communication and leadership skills,” Hicks said. “This is one of those programs that I don’t think a lot of people know about, but it’s been very beneficial.”

TRUST training is not mandatory, and units can request the daylong course by calling (315) 772-9018 or (315) 772-2279.

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Photo Captions –

Soldiers with D Company, 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, practice communication skills during team-building challenges Oct. 17 at Fort Drum. The TRUST (Teamwork, Respect, Unit Strength Training) course is taught by Bill Van Orman, Suicide Prevention Program coordinator, and Tom Wojcikowski, Family Advocacy Program specialist, both with the Fort Drum Soldier and Family Readiness Division. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)