



DOT&PF

Tribal Transportation Training

Cultural Awareness in Tribal Consultation
for Alaska Transportation Projects



INTRODUCTION

Alaska Native communities are diverse
Peoples • Languages • Cultures

Purpose: Strengthen Cultural
Understanding • Improve Consultation
Quality • Reduce Project Risk • Support
Respectful Engagement

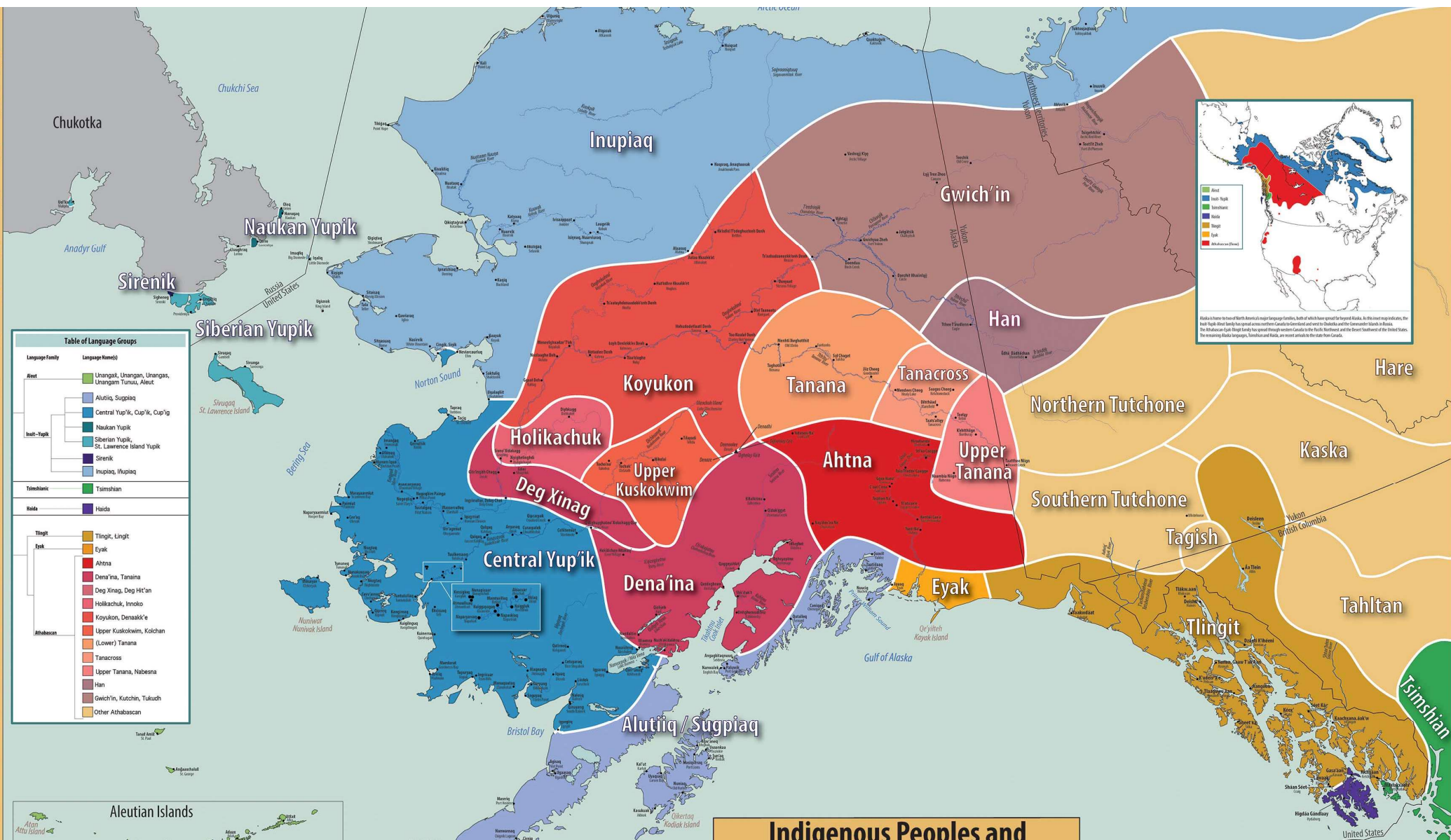
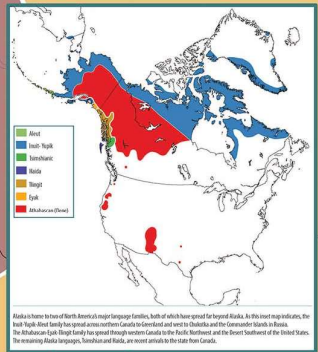


Table of Language Groups

Language Family	Language(s)
Aleut	Unangax̂, Unangan, Unangas, Unangan Tunuu, Aleut
	Alutiiq, Sugpiaq
	Central Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Cup'ig
	Naukan Yupik
	Siberian Yupik, St. Lawrence Island Yupik
Inuit-Yupik	Sirenik
	Inupiaq, Iñupiaq
Tsimshianic	Tsimshian
Kwakiwiltic	Haida
	Haida
Tlingit	Tlingit, Lintit
	Eyak
Athabascan	Ahtna
	Dena'ina, Tanaina
	Deg Xinag, Deg Hit'an
	Holikachuk, Inoko
	Koyukon, Denaik'e
	Upper Kuskokwim, Kolchan
	(Lower) Tanana
	Tanacross
	Upper Tanana, Nabesna
	Han
Gwich'in, Kutchin, Tukudh	
Other Athabascan	



Indigenous Peoples and

What Is Culture?

Commonly developed ways of understanding and interacting that influence how people communicate, prioritize values, perceive time, and make choices.



CULTURAL AWARENESS

Key to effective communication and
meaningful consultation and
collaboration

<https://dot.alaska.gov/tribalrelations/>

Cultural Assumptions

Unspoken expectations that feel like common sense but are culturally learned.

Identifying Assumptions

Discomfort, frustration, and 'should' statements often indicate assumptions.



WHY IT MATTERS

Systems weren't built with
Native voices centered

Is It a Two-Way Street?

Awareness is mutual, but responsibility
is not equal in institutional settings.



WHEN VOICES ARE MISSING

Misunderstanding can
cause harm

Safety

Trust

Subsistence

Access

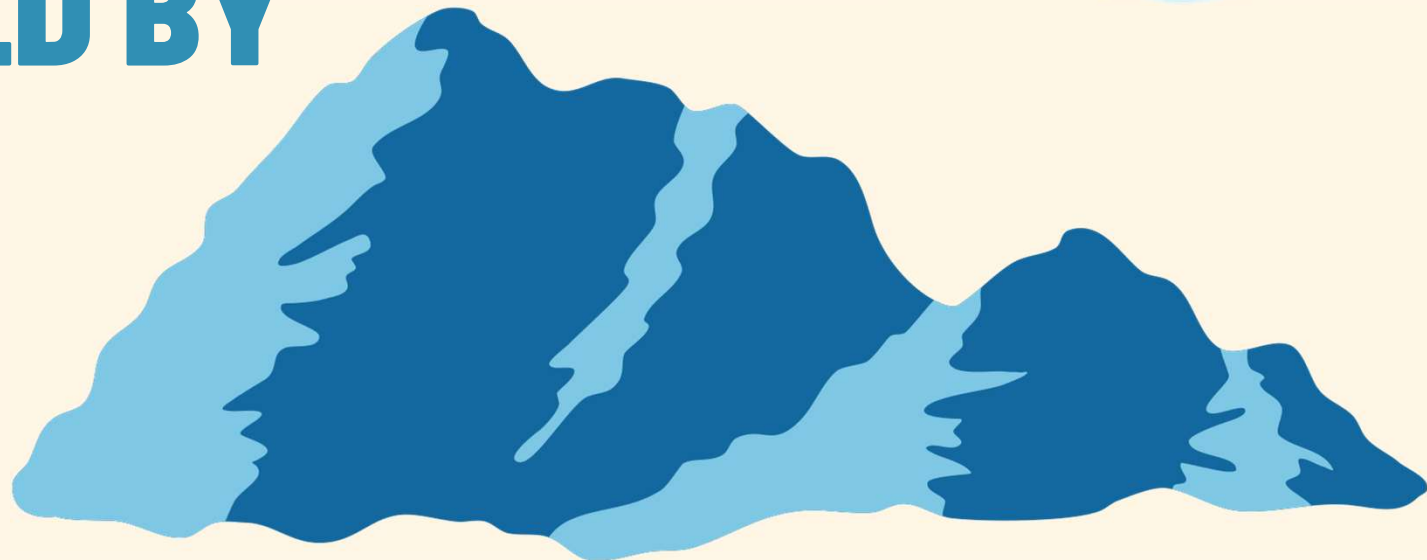


AGENCIES PRIORITIZE

- Safety • Schedules • Budgets • Compliance

GOVERNMENT PROCESSES ARE OFTEN MEASURED BY

- Deliverables • Deadlines • Costs



Time, Seasonality & Access

Weather, subsistence, capacity, and access
can shape availability and timelines.

Language & Place Names

Language encodes history
and worldview.

Historical Context

Recent history with government shapes trust and engagement.

Multiple Governance Systems

Tribes, ANCSA corporations,
and traditional leadership coexist.

Alaska Native Peoples & Tribal System

KEY FACTS

- 5 Major Alaska Native Cultural Groups
- Over 10 Distinct Cultures
- Nearly 40% of all U.S. Federally Recognized Tribes
- Over 20 Distinct Alaska Native Languages
- 12 ANCSA Regional Corporations
- Nearly 200 ANCSA Village Corporations

ALASKA VS LOWER 48

- Federally Recognized Tribes (575)
Lower 48: 346 | Alaska: 229
- Indian Reservations (326)
Lower 48: 325 | Alaska: 1

WHY IT MATTERS

- Regional diversity requires tailored consultation
- Governance systems vary by community
- Land, identity, seasonality shape engagement

Communication Styles

Silence, story, and indirect
communication convey meaning.

Subsistence Is Central

Identity, Economy, Culture, Spiritual, and Law.

COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCE

Place • identity • long-term impacts





Traditional

Local

Knowledge

Expertise

**INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE
IS ESSENTIAL**

From Awareness to Practice

Assumptions affect interpretation,
timing, feedback, and process.

DOT Best Practices

Pause, Ask, adapt process,
and follow through.

Reflection

What assumptions am I
bringing into my work?

**Building stronger consultation, communication,
and collaboration with Alaska Tribes**



Key Takeaways

Cultural awareness is an ongoing professional practice.



Listen

Learn

Connect

Respect

CULTURAL AWARENESS

Is more than just a checklist. It is an opportunity to listen, learn, connect, respect, and build trust.

CULTURAL AWARENESS REFLECTS RESPECT

Listen • Ask • Reflect • Follow through

This will help to create a better process, show respect, build trust, create partnerships, improve projects and decrease conflict.



THANK YOU

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DOT&PF Cultural Awareness in Tribal Consultation – Presenter Script

1. Title Slide

This training focuses on cultural awareness in Tribal consultation for Alaska transportation projects. Today's session is about strengthening understanding, improving consultation quality, reducing project risk, and supporting respectful engagement with Alaska Native communities.

2. Introduction

Alaska Native communities are diverse in peoples, languages, and cultures. There is no single 'Native experience.' The purpose of this training is to build awareness, so working with Tribal communities is more effective, respectful, and responsive. Cultural awareness is not about memorizing facts but about improving how we listen, communicate, respond, and make decisions.

3. Alaska Map

4. What Is Culture?

Culture refers to commonly developed ways of understanding and interacting. It influences how people communicate, prioritize values, perceive time, and make choices. Culture shapes expectations and interpretations even when we are not conscious of it.

5. Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness is the foundation of effective communication and meaningful consultation. It allows us to recognize differences without assigning judgment and helps create space for mutual respect and collaboration. It also encourages us to pause before reacting, ask clarifying questions, and adapt our approach so engagement is responsive rather than one-size-fits-all.

6. Cultural Assumptions

Cultural assumptions are unspoken expectations that feel like common sense but are culturally learned. They are not universal truths. Everyone has them, and they often shape how we interpret behavior or communication. Becoming aware of these assumptions helps us slow down, check our interpretations, and remain open to perspectives that may differ from our own.

7. Identifying Assumptions

Discomfort, frustration, or 'should' statements often indicate we are operating from an assumption. When we notice these signals, it is an opportunity to pause and ask questions rather than react. This pause creates space to clarify intent, understand context, and prevent misinterpretation before it turns into conflict or disengagement.

8. Why It Matters – Systems Weren't Built with Native Voices Centered

Many institutional systems were not originally designed with Native voices or priorities at the center. This history influences trust, engagement, and expectations today. Awareness helps us avoid unintentionally repeating patterns that exclude or marginalize.

Example: In 1915, Interior Alaska Tribal Chiefs from multiple Athabascan villages organized a council with Judge James Wickersham in Fairbanks after learning that federal railroad planning could disturb a burial ground near Nenana and alter traditional land use. The Chiefs came together on their own initiative to advocate for protection of the cemetery and to oppose the creation of reservations, explaining that fixed boundaries would disrupt seasonal hunting, fishing, and family mobility. Their collective action demonstrated that Alaska Native leaders were actively asserting land rights, cultural protection, and self-determination long before formal consultation policies existed, an important reminder that early, meaningful engagement and respect for local priorities and knowledge have deep historical roots in Alaska.

9. Is It a Two-Way Street?

Awareness is mutual, but responsibility is not equal in institutional settings. Agencies carry a greater responsibility to ensure accessibility, clarity, and respect because they hold decision-making authority. Agency decisions can create lasting impacts on a community's land access, subsistence routes, and cultural sites for generations, while the agency may only experience the project as a completed deliverable, this imbalance is why the responsibility to slow down, listen carefully, and engage meaningfully rests more heavily on the institution.

10. When Voices Are Missing

When voices are missing, misunderstanding can cause harm. The impacts can include safety risks, erosion of trust, disruption of subsistence, and limited access. Listening early prevents conflict later. A transportation project planned without early Tribal input could reroute or block a long-used river or trail access point, forcing families onto unsafe travel routes, reducing access to food sources, and creating long-term impacts on safety, culture, and community trust that persist far beyond the construction phase.

11. Agencies Prioritize

Agencies often prioritize safety, schedules, budgets, and compliance. These are important, but they are not the only factors communities and Tribal governments consider. Balancing these priorities with community realities leads to stronger outcomes.

12. Government Processes

Government processes are often measured by deliverables, deadlines, and costs. Communities may measure success differently, through relationships, culture, traditions, continuity, and long-term impacts. Recognizing perspectives is essential.

13. Time, Seasonality & Access

Weather, subsistence seasons, community capacity, and transportation access can shape availability and timelines. Flexibility and early coordination are critical in Alaska due to geography and climate. Scheduling consultation during peak fishing or hunting season may mean key knowledge holders are on the land or water for weeks, and construction timed during sensitive periods—such as caribou calving or major fish runs—can disrupt food sources and cultural practices unless timelines are coordinated in advance.

14. Language & Place Names

Language encodes history and worldview. Place names often carry cultural and historical meaning. Using correct names demonstrates respect and signals that we value local knowledge.

Example: North America's tallest mountain has long carried both the Indigenous name Denali, meaning "The High One" or "Great One" in Koyukon Athabaskan, and the federal name Mount McKinley that appeared on U.S. maps for much of the 20th century. In 2015, the name Denali received formal federal recognition, and in 2025 an Executive Order (EO) directed federal records to again use the name Mount McKinley, while the name Denali continues to be widely used across Alaska by residents, Tribes, and state institutions. The differing reactions to these name changes illustrate that place names hold cultural, historical, and identity-based significance beyond simple geography, and they serve as a reminder that decisions affecting names, language, and cultural references can resonate deeply in communities and benefit from early, broad awareness of local perspectives, beliefs, and histories.

15. Historical Context

Recent history with government agencies shapes current trust and engagement. Understanding this context helps explain hesitancy or caution and encourages patience and transparency. In rural Alaskan communities, some past transportation or resource projects moved forward before meaningful consultation occurred, leaving residents concerned that decisions may have been made before their input was heard, leading residents to feel that decisions were already finalized and their subsistence or access routes, or other cultural concerns were secondary.

16. Multiple Governance Systems

Tribes, ANCSA corporations, and traditional leadership systems coexist. Recognizing these structures prevents confusion and ensures communication reaches all appropriate entities.

Example: A road right-of-way (ROW) project may require government-to-government consultation with the Tribe regarding cultural sites and community impacts, while land access or easement negotiations may occur with an ANCSA village or regional

corporation that holds title to the land, and local traditional leaders may also need to be engaged for knowledge about historical use areas or burial locations, each entity plays a different but essential role.

17. Alaska Native Peoples & Tribal System Snapshot

This snapshot highlights the scale and diversity of Alaska Native cultures, languages, Tribes, and corporations. It reinforces that consultation cannot be one-size-fits-all and must be tailored to each region and community.

18. Communication Styles

Silence, storytelling, and indirect communication can convey meaning. Pauses may indicate thoughtfulness rather than disengagement. Listening fully is essential.

19. Subsistence Is Central

Subsistence is central to identity, economy, culture, spirituality, and law. It is not a hobby or secondary activity; it is foundational to community life and decision-making. Native Subsistence rights are also recognized in federal law, meaning seasonal access to hunting, fishing, and gathering areas is both a cultural necessity and a legal consideration in project planning and scheduling.

Example: Subsistence harvesting in Alaska can be confusing because the same river or lake that families rely on for food and travel may fall under different management systems at the same time. While many major navigable waters are owned by the State, federal subsistence protections can still apply in certain areas, which means communities may experience changing or overlapping rules depending on location and season. For rural families, this is not an abstract policy issue, it directly affects when they can fish, how they reach traditional sites, and whether long-standing practices continue without interruption. This is why early coordination and awareness are critical: transportation or construction projects that affect waterways can unintentionally disrupt access, safety, and food security if these realities are not understood and factored in from the start.

20. Communities Experience Place, Identity & Long-Term Impacts

Communities often view projects through the lens of long-term impacts to place and identity, not just immediate benefits. This broader perspective should be considered in planning and communication.

Example: Relocating a road or altering a river crossing may solve an immediate transportation need, but if it affects historical property, traditional camp, burial area, or fishing site, the impact can extend beyond construction and influence cultural continuity, traditional practices, and community identity for generations..

21. Indigenous Knowledge Is Essential

Traditional knowledge and local expertise provide insight that technical data alone cannot. Including Indigenous knowledge improves project design, safety, and sustainability, and shows respect for Tribal communities and governance structures. For example, local knowledge about seasonal ice thickness, wildlife migration paths, or permafrost and erosion patterns can identify risks and design considerations that may not appear in engineering surveys alone.

22. From Awareness to Practice

Awareness must be translated into action. Assumptions affect interpretation, timing, feedback, and process. Recognizing this allows us to adjust behavior and improve engagement. In practice, this may mean allowing additional time for seasonal subsistence activities, clarifying decisions in plain language, or adjusting meeting formats so Elders and local leaders can participate comfortably.

23. DOT Best Practices

Best practices include pausing before responding, asking clarifying questions, adapting processes when appropriate, and follow through on commitments. Consistency builds credibility. For example, sharing draft plans early, confirming next steps in writing, and returning to the community with updates, even when timelines change, demonstrates reliability and respect.

24. Reflection

Take a moment to reflect: What assumptions am I bringing into my work? Reflection strengthens self-awareness and improves future interactions.

Ask yourself:

- *Am I assuming silence means agreement, that the “right” decision is already clear, or that the community can respond on the same timeline as the agency?*
- *Am I assuming attendance equals agreement or absence means lack of interest?*
- *Am I assuming that emails or written notices alone are sufficient outreach?*
- *Am I viewing project success only through schedules and budgets rather than long-term community impacts? What does project success look like to the community?*
- *Am I expecting immediate answers when the Tribe/ANC may need time for internal discussion and decision-making?*

25. Alaska Community Photos

These visuals represent the diversity of Alaska communities and landscapes. They serve as a reminder that each location has unique people, priorities, and histories.

26. Key Takeaways

Cultural awareness is an ongoing professional practice. It requires continual learning, humility, and openness rather than a checklist approach. It is built through consistent listening, relationship-building, and a willingness to adjust processes based on what communities share over time.

27. Cultural Awareness – More Than a Checklist

Cultural awareness is an opportunity to listen, learn, connect, and respect. It is about relationship-building, not compliance. When approached this way, consultation becomes an ongoing partnership rather than a one-time requirement, leading to stronger trust and more durable project outcomes.

28. Cultural Awareness Reflects Respect

Listening, asking, reflecting, and following through help create better processes, build trust, strengthen partnerships, improve projects, and decrease conflict. These actions signal that community knowledge and participation are valued, not just acknowledged, and that engagement continues beyond a single meeting or milestone.

29. Thank You

Thank you for taking the time to attend this training and for your commitment to respectful engagement. Continuing to learn and apply these practices supports stronger partnerships and shared growth with Tribal communities, leading to more thoughtful decisions and improved outcomes for everyone involved.

(Slide Timing Estimate: Internal Time Management for Training)

<u>Section Type</u>	<u>Slide Range</u>	<u>Avg Time Each</u>	<u>Total</u>
Opening / Orientation	1–4	1–1.5 min	5 min
Concepts & Framing	5–12	1.5–2 min	14–16 min
Alaska Context & Examples	13–20	2–3 min	18–22 min
Practice & Application	21–24	2–3 min	10–12 min
Visual Reset	25	1 min	1 min
Summary & Closing	26–29	1–1.5 min	5–6 min