

THE LEADERSHIP WISDOM OF YOZAN UESUGI: LEAN PRINCIPLES, ZEN AND IKIGAI

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Abstract. Yozan Uesugi, an 18th-century daimyo of Yonezawa in Japan's Yamagata Prefecture, transformed a struggling, debt-ridden region into a prosperous, sustainable economy. Yozan's leadership style stood out among his fellow daimyos, as he prioritized the well-being of his people above all else. This led to a change to a prosperous and sustainable economy, free from debt with low living costs and a greater quality of life for the people. This conceptual paper explores Yozan's life by examining key historical events to uncover their psychological significance, employing thematic coding strategies. The research aims to assess Yozan's effective leadership approach through a comparative analysis, incorporating both organizational and psychological perspectives. The goal of the paper is to uncover the key principles driving his leadership success and develop a framework that can serve as a guide for future leaders. In summary, the paper analyzed Yozan's leadership approach, emphasizing the promotion of well-being through compassion, Zen and ikigai (one's purpose in life). The discussion synthesizes the findings to offer valuable insights into modern leadership practices, presenting a leadership style grounded in simplicity, compassion, Zen and ikigai. Furthermore, the paper presents an effective leadership framework based on Yozan's principles and methods, designed to guide future leaders.

Keywords: Yozan Uesugi, lean leadership, compassion, Zen, ikigai.

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1. Introduction and Overview of Yozan's Historical Background

This paper explores Yozan's leadership, focusing on wellness through lean leadership, compassion, Zen and ikigai. It examines lean leadership as a tool for continuous improvement and team empowerment (Aij & Rapsaniotis, 2017), emphasizing respect and adaptability to drive change. Leadership is defined in various ways: Bass (1990) views it as influencing group activities, Northouse (2016) highlights guiding toward common goals and Yukl (2013) focuses on interpersonal influence. These definitions align with Yozan's approach, which emphasized empowerment and improvement, akin to lean leadership (Aij & Rapsaniotis, 2017), while also reflecting servant leadership values. His leadership focused on the well-being and growth of others, integrating compassion, ikigai and Zen (Kotera *et al.*, 2024). Yozan applied Zen's

mindfulness and *ikigai*, further enhancing the well-being of his followers through passion, skill and value (Nagatomo, 2019; Fido *et al.*, 2019). In contrast, modern Western leadership often prioritizes power over well-being, leading to empathy gaps and unrealistic expectations (Chapman, 2020). This review synthesizes Yozan's compassionate governance to propose a leadership framework inspired by his wisdom.

Historians note that Yozan Uesugi, the ninth lord of the Yonezawa domain in Yamagata Prefecture, was an influential figure in 18th and 19th century Japan. Born in 1751 as the second son of Tanemi Akizuki, lord of Takanabe in Hyuga (Uchimura, 1908), he was adopted at the age of 10 by Yukihiime, the daughter of the Yonezawa lord, who was affected by paralysis that hindered her communication (Domon, 1996). This experience prompted Yozan to prioritize behaviour over physical appearance (Uchimura, 1908; Domon, 1996). Yozan studied under the Confucian scholar Hosoi Heishu, whose teachings strongly promoted courage and shaped Yozan's subsequent leadership style (Domon, 1996). When Yozan succeeded in governing Yonezawa in 1767 at the age of 17 years, he was determined to live according to four basic principles of Hosoi's teachings: putting people first, training and studying martial arts, using fair rewards and punishments and living with simplicity and frugality (Aoki & Dardes, 1976). Under Yozan's leadership, the Great Frugality Order of 1767 implemented simple and frugal living. All citizens, including Yozan, were required to reduce their living costs by more than half to help rebuild the economy (Domon, 1996). Further, Yozan focused on developing economic and sustainable solutions by improving agriculture and other industries, e.g., salt harvesting, paper, pottery manufacturing and weaving (Takano, 1993).

Yozan considered education and learning to be the foundation of good governance (Domon, 1992). In 1776, he launched Kojokan in Motogomachi - which is now the oldest public school in Japan. Having sought advice from his teacher, Hosoi Heishu, the school encouraged practical exercises alongside scholarly activities to help students develop key political and economic skills (Domon, 1992). This gave future generations the skills to maintain economic growth and stability (Uchimura, 1908).

The Great Tenmei Famine, regarded as the most catastrophic famine in modern Japanese history, afflicted Japan from 1782 to 1788. It was instigated by a convergence of factors including unusually cold weather, volcanic eruptions and a governmental tax policy that resulted in inflation of rice prices, leading to the deaths of 900,000 Japanese individuals (Domon, 1996). Under Yozan's leadership, Yonezawa experienced no famine-related deaths during this time. He bolstered the domain's food supply by purchasing rice from the North and distributing it equally among his people (Domon, 1996). He also circulated brochures identifying edible grasses and used the industries he had developed to help his people survive (Domon, 1996).

Yozan retired at 35, passing control of the Yonezawa domain to Haruhiro Uesugi, the son of his predecessor, Shigesada Uesugi. He then served as an advisor to Haruhiro, guided by the four values he established at the start of his leadership. Yozan remained committed to advancing Yonezawa's financial and social development, maintaining his frugal lifestyle until he passed away from ill health at the age of 72 (Domon, 1996). Yozan's compassionate leadership, characterized by prioritizing people and guided by principles such as training in martial arts, fairness and frugality as advocated by Aoki and Dardes (1976), successfully steered the Yonezawa domain out of economic hardship, ultimately enhancing the well-being of its residents (Suzuki, 2016). In 2007, Yozan was recognized as the leading ideal leader in a survey of historical figures among Japanese workers. His style of leadership is revered not only in Japan but worldwide, with the

popular quote ‘Where there is a will, there is a way’ attributed to Yozan (Suzuki, 2016). This was frequently cited by contemporary leaders like Caroline Kennedy, the daughter of the former US president, John F. Kennedy, who admired Yozan’s approach to leadership (Suzuki, 2016).

2. Methods and synthesis of analysis

This conceptual study investigates Yozan’s lifetime through chronological events to identify prominent and imperative origins by using an unstructured methodology with thematic coding strategies. The authors chose a conceptual approach to explore ideas, rather than presenting empirical data. Data was collected manually through spontaneous, informal literature reviews, allowing for a flexible, open-ended approach without predetermined questions. After collection, the data was transcribed for analysis and discussed with the authors, a crucial step for accurate coding and thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2007). The authors reviewed the transcriptions to understand the content and refined the themes to ensure they were supported by the data. Findings were interpreted about the research objectives, providing insights and implications. Thematic coding segmented the data, assigning codes to meaningful sentences and organizing them into themes that centered on compassion, well-being and leadership, key concepts identified in historical texts about Yozan. The results were presented in a narrative, supported by data examples and this process reorganized the literature on Yozan’s leadership into a more cohesive framework (Gibbs, 2007).

This inductive process enabled insights to emerge naturally from the data, helping to clarify complex information that might have been overlooked with a more structured approach. While flexible, the unstructured inductive process was time-consuming compared to structured methods, as the authors immersed themselves in the data, making it labour-intensive and potentially seen as a limitation. Nevertheless, the process relied on maintaining an audit trail, using member checking and ensuring transparency in coding to enhance reliability and validity. These steps ensured an accurate and consistent representation of the data’s complexity (Bryman & Bell, 2015) and helped clarify the presentation of the findings, enhancing the understanding of contemporary leadership approaches centered on compassion, Zen, *ikigai* and a culture of continuous improvement. These approaches emphasize well-being and empower individuals to make decisions that drive change, thereby enriching the knowledge base. The coded concepts were further explored through a comparative approach, contrasting them with historical texts on Yozan and leadership styles such as servant and lean leadership, viewed from organizational and psychological perspectives. These views were based on the foundations of synthesis of analysis by examining and then discussing the life of Yozan by using several opposing sources including textbooks and academic journals (Walk, 1998).

One of the co-authors who was the most familiar with Yozan suggested a book about Yozan (Uchimura, 1908) to the other authors, who then familiarized themselves with Yozan. Additionally, each author individually learned about Yozan’s leadership via online searches. The author team, which comprised international researchers specialized in leadership, organizational psychology and mental health, met to discuss key themes in Yozan’s leadership. The synthesis identified that his leadership could be well-understood through the lenses of compassion, Zen and *ikigai*. Compassion entails being attuned to the suffering of oneself and others, as well as a commitment to alleviating that pain

(Gilbert, 2010). Zen refers to a state of calmness, feeling contented with your own thoughts with the awareness of your own place in the universe (Suzuki, 1973). Ikigai relates to the sense of having a reason for living (Fido *et al.*, 2019). In examinations of Yozan's leadership, scholarly literature highlights the significance of compassion, Zen philosophy and ikigai. This underscores Yozan's commitment to prioritizing individuals and guiding them with compassion to enhance their well-being, as articulated by Suzuki (2016).

3. Analysis from compassion

Yozan's leadership reflected a profound compassion for his team. Unlike simple caring, compassion adds depth and grounding which inspires altruism, generosity and kindness, both toward others and oneself (Gibbs & Sattarova, 2025). He empowered individuals and fostered a culture of respect, encouraging team members to share their ideas and take ownership of their work. This contrasted with many of his contemporary daimyos, who were preoccupied with self-serving and egoistic rewards like status, wealth and material possessions (Domon, 1992).

Gilbert (2009) describes three key regulatory systems in humans: the threat and self-protection system, the incentive and resource-seeking system and the soothing-contentment system. When these systems are well-balanced, they help create the right conditions for compassion to arise (Gilbert, 2009). During Yozan's leadership, Yozan maintained stability among these systems. For instance, when he became governor, the Yonezawa domain was experiencing financial difficulties (Domon, 1992). Gilbert's (2009) threat and self-protection system suggests that perceived threats can provoke negative emotions like fear or avoidance. Yet, Yozan managed these challenges effectively, implementing transparent and meaningful improvements to address the financial crisis (Sakai, 2017).

Further, Yozan displayed a well-regulated soothing-contentment system, which is activated when an individual feels secure and at ease (Kotera, 2021). Caring behaviours can develop the soothing-contentment system and his experience of living among family members with disabilities, may in part, explain his positive calmness (Depue & Morrone-Stupinsky, 2005). This attribute is vital to Yozan's leadership as individuals with an unbalanced soothing-contentment system can display shame and be highly self-critical, which can impede self-compassion (Kotera *et al.*, 2019). Finally, Yozan was not dominated by his incentive and resource-seeking system, which can motivate a person to pursue external and pleasurable resources (Domon, 1992). Instead, Yozan was able to consider the consequences of his actions on others. He remained humble and kept his own desires to a minimum (Domon, 1992).

Yozan encouraged compassion by example. He restructured the Yonezawa domain's power dynamics to help reduce corruption, created regional officials whose role was to teach residents moral behaviours (Uchimura, 1908; Sakai, 2017) and developed a welfare system that encouraged neighbourly support (Fukumoto, 2019). Further, Yozan created an environment where he valued the voices of his people, which included gaining feedback in communal conferences (Uchimura, 1908) and from opinion boxes (Kozawa, 2010). Yozan's leadership characterized by respect and compassion, fostered a sense of belonging and mutual support among his citizens (Kozawa, 2010). Yozan's emphasis on prioritizing the well-being of others through compassionate methods also played a role in

improving citizens' welfare (Suzuki, 2016), ultimately assisting him in steering Yonezawa through financial and economic crises.

Yozan's compassionate approach highlights emotional well-being and empathy, aligning with servant leadership by prioritizing support to enhance followers' well-being (Jit *et al.*, 2017; Kotera *et al.*, 2024). He also emphasizes continuous improvement and efficiency, similar to lean leadership, by empowering individuals to drive change, which can only be achieved through compassion (Aij & Rapsaniotis, 2017). However, his approach more closely mirrors lean leadership, which fosters a culture of continuous improvement where individuals are engaged in identifying problems and leading change (Aij & Rapsaniotis, 2017). Yozan's efforts to rebuild the economy within a culture of respect and human flourishing align with Lean principles focused on resource efficiency (Radnor & Osborne, 2013; Jayamaha *et al.*, 2014). A contemporary example of this approach is Toyota Motor Corporation (TMC), renowned for its 'Toyota Way,' which emphasizes respect, compassion and continuous improvement in production (James, 2021).

4. Analysis from Zen philosophy

Japanese Zen philosophy emphasizes living in the present moment, simplicity and direct experience over intellectual knowledge. It encourages mindfulness through meditation, where one focuses on the breath and allows thoughts to pass without attachment (Suzuki, 1973). Zen teaches that true understanding comes not from reasoning, but from intuitive insight and experiencing life. It values minimalism and embraces imperfection, recognizing beauty in the natural state of things (Yoneyama, 2007).

Zen emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and encourages letting go of distractions to achieve peace and deeper understanding. It involves seeing into one's own nature and seeking freedom (Nagatomo, 2019). Zen practice aligns with simplicity and frugality, as shown by Yozan and encourages making decisions calmly, free from anxiety and stress (Nagatomo, 2019). Yozan was able to use Zen practice to better understand the origins of Yonezawa's economic difficulties and ongoing food scarcities with transparency and conviction (Abe, 2018), aligning with his moral principle of serving his people (Asakawa, 1911).

Yozan took on a paternal role for the people of Yonezawa, revitalizing the state and upholding justice during his leadership (Armstrong, 1914). He prioritized the financial well-being of the state and its citizens over personal gain, reducing his expenses by adopting a simple lifestyle and leading by example (Ravina, 2013). This is exemplified by an epistle to a descendant where he wrote, 'The lord exists for the sake of the state and the people; the state and the people do not exist for the sake of the lord' (Kasaya, 1988).

Fostering Zen attitudes requires traditions to be acknowledged without threatening core belief systems (McCann, 2019). Yozan recognized this and while his leadership approach focused on serving the people, he also made time to honour his roots by meeting family obligations (Ravina, 2013). Viewing himself as a fellow servant of the state (Ravina, 1998), he established a social welfare system designed to assist those most in need (Armstrong, 1914). This was known as the 'Three Help Spirits' and consisted of self-help, mutual-help and public-help in the form of clerical relief (Fukumoto, 2019). Yozan, with his compassion for the needy, encouraged mutual support. Through his Zen teachings on filial piety, along with his deep respect, gratitude and care for others and the

interconnectedness of all, Yozan cultivated humility, compassion and appreciation for those who came before us. Zen practitioners can embody these values of filial piety while also fostering inner peace and harmony with the world around them.

Zen practitioners develop wisdom that goes beyond discrimination, promoting peace, clarity and compassion for all. It enables a perspective of the world free from judgment, attachment or bias. This wisdom, grounded in non-discrimination, is complemented by compassion for oneself, others and the environment. The literature data emphasized key themes in Zen practice, including mindfulness and self-awareness, which foster well-being. This approach encouraged thoughtful decision-making, empathy and a balanced, thriving environment for Yozan's followers (Nagatomo, 2019).

Meditation by freeing the mind, helps practitioners 'see' reality as it exists and aids in developing a deeper understanding of other people and their experiences (Braguzzi, 2015). To accomplish this, practitioners must observe and experience phenomena rather than just rationalizing them (Herrigel, 1989). Yozan valued this and he worked directly with his people, to understand what community reforms were necessary (Domon, 1992). He displayed great self-awareness and developed communities based on vision, authenticity and endeavour which brought about change and freed the region from debt (Armstrong, 2019).

Yozan followed and embraced Zen values, fostering a prosperous and thriving economic state (Ravina, 1998). Yozan's decision-making was guided by a higher purpose (Asakawa, 1911) and his benevolence and compassionate leadership cultivated a loyal following willing to support the 'Three Help Spirits' welfare system (Fukumoto, 2019). He applied Zen teachings to encourage collaboration, particularly within this system, which emphasizes social support, economic assistance and emotional well-being. This holistic approach aims to create a sustainable welfare framework based on collective responsibility and community engagement, shifting away from reliance on government assistance towards more localized, human-centered solutions in welfare policy (Fukumoto, 2019).

Yozan's leadership, based on consideration for others and collective wisdom, unlocked human potential, leading to positive outcomes for the Yonezawa domain. Zen's influence fostered a sense of community, prioritizing well-being and calm. Zen values promote mindfulness, ethical conduct and a holistic view of life, supporting compassionate leadership (Nagatomo, 2019). In the corporate world, TMC adopts Lean principles aligned with Zen, prioritizing continuous improvement and collaboration. However, contemporary leadership challenges highlight the need for a human-centered management system, as management styles alone cannot ensure sustainability (Yoneyama, 2007).

Yozan's leadership, similar to TMC's approach, emphasized compassion, mindfulness and considering others, empowering individuals to make informed decisions and reach their potential, driving positive outcomes. This mirrors the contributions of both Zen and Lean, which foster a deep sense of life, knowledge and community through their philosophies, while promoting continuous learning and improvement to help individuals realize their full potential (Yoneyama, 2007).

In summary, Zen practice emphasizes meditation and direct experience over rationalization (Baccarani *et al.*, 2013; Herrigel, 1989). Yozan applied these principles to lead Yonezawa with compassion, integrity and purpose, fostering prosperity (Ravina, 1998; Asakawa, 1911). Zen teachings promote a sense of life, knowledge and community, with a focus on the well-being of individuals (Nagatomo, 2019). When integrated with

Zen, Lean cultivates a mindset of collaboration and continuous growth, guided by peace, clarity and compassion. Lean leadership empowers individuals to reach their full potential, fosters mutual respect and uncovers opportunities for improvement (Stanton *et al.*, 2014). Like Yozan, TMC integrates lean leadership and associated Zen values, encouraging individuals to share ethical responsibilities across employees, shareholders and customers.

This approach focuses on continuous improvement through ongoing learning and collaboration to uncover opportunities for growth and development (Yoneyama, 2007). Zen philosophy and Yozan's leadership style can be compared in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Zen Philosophy and Yozan's leadership style

Zen Philosophy	Yozan's Leadership Style
Mindfulness - Focus on being present and aware in the moment.	Mindful Decision-making - Focused on present challenges and solutions to benefit his people.
Simplicity - Emphasizing minimalism and reducing distractions.	Simplified Living - Implemented the Great Frugality Order to reduce costs and improve sustainability.
Compassion - Cultivating empathy and care for others.	Compassionate Leadership - Prioritized the well-being of his citizens through fair distribution and welfare programs.
Frugality - Avoiding excess and focusing on necessities.	Economic Efficiency - Reduced unnecessary spending and promoted sustainable agriculture and industries.
Balance - Harmonizing actions and decisions with nature and people.	Balanced Governance - Focused on harmony among economic, social and environmental factors.
Self-Reflection - Encouraging self-awareness and personal growth.	Personal Discipline - Practiced self-restraint and modeled behavior for his people.
Non-attachment - Letting go of ego and material desires.	Humble Leadership - Avoided personal gain and focused on collective well-being.
Direct Experience - Learning through practice rather than theory.	Practical Learning - Established schools like Kojikan to promote hands-on education and skill development.

5. Analysis from ikigai

Ikigai is a Japanese concept meaning “a reason for being”. It involves the intersection of four key elements: what you love, what you're good at, what the world needs and what you can be paid for. When these align, it brings a sense of purpose and fulfillment in life (Kotera, 2021). Ikigai also reflects the values that make life meaningful, with happiness being achieved through having a purposeful existence (Kamiya, 1966; Mitsuhashi, 2018). The literature data revealed that Yozan applied ikigai principles in his leadership, aligning individual purpose with community needs. He inspired followers to find meaning in their work, creating a culture that valued both personal passion and the common good. This focus helped revitalize Yonezawa's economy, fostering a thriving society that embodied ikigai's balance of passion, mission and vocation (Kotera, 2021).

Yozan's focus on ikigai played a key role in enhancing the welfare of the people in Yonezawa. Ikigai fosters balance and psychological well-being, providing a solid foundation for addressing and overcoming challenges (Kotera, 2021). A key leadership challenge for Yozan was creating a sustainable state to alleviate poverty. He took strategic risks to improve the domain's economy, such as encouraging Samurai family members to engage in weaving (Abe, 2018) and providing farmers with economic incentives to reclaim wastelands for increased productivity (Honjo, 1926).

Ikigai was at the heart of Yozan's approach, alongside Zen and lean leadership. His philosophy embraced ikigai's values, fostering a strong sense of purpose by inspiring people to work in areas they were both passionate about and skilled in. Yozan's goal was to improve his people's quality of life, with the broader mission of continually enhancing the region (Asakawa, 1911). To achieve this, he led the domain with integrity, living a simple and purposeful life. His passion for his people's welfare, central to his decision-making and his compassionate leadership drove his mission to improve the state's economy. He served the residents of Yonezawa selflessly, practicing frugality to reduce the enduring debt (Asakawa, 1911). His dedication to serving his family and citizens surpassed his obligations to the Shogunate (Uchimura, 1908; Ravina, 2013). Admiring Confucian principles, he honoured his ancestors, provided for his descendants and cared for his citizens (Ravina, 2013). He established a social welfare system that offered education in Confucian principles and medicine (Armstrong, 1914). Promoting frugality, he rewarded those who excelled and reprimanded those who failed in their duties (Armstrong, 1914). His leadership united citizens, regardless of class, by giving them a shared purpose and meaning in life (Kamiya, 1966).

Many philosophers, including Hasegawa et al. (2003), noted that ikigai is associated with positive relationships and helps people to fulfill social roles within society. Individuals with ikigai, like Yozan, often share interests and a sense of responsibility with others, strengthening community bonds (Kamiya, 1966). Yozan prioritized the education and welfare of the people in Yonezawa, enabling citizens to support one another without incurring debt, which earned him a selfless reputation among his people and later administrators (Asakawa, 1911).

In business, TMC does not explicitly mention using ikigai, but they employ strategies that associate with ikigai to enhance societal contributions, fulfill corporate responsibilities and prioritize people as their most valuable asset, all while ensuring personal satisfaction (Larue, 2023). TMC's approach offers valuable insights for modern leaders by fostering alignment between passion, purpose and professional roles. However, it can also present challenges, such as limiting flexibility, leading to burnout and conflicting with practical business needs, particularly during crises or in diverse cultural settings (Larue, 2023). Despite these challenges, ikigai helps leaders foster fulfillment within their teams, boosting engagement and job satisfaction. By balancing personal and professional life, upholding integrity and focusing on a higher purpose, leaders can inspire trust, resilience and sustained success. Ikigai also encourages a holistic leadership approach that supports both personal well-being and organizational growth (Kotera, 2021).

In summary, ikigai offers modern leaders a framework for aligning passion, purpose and professional roles. TMC like ikigai emphasizes purpose, respect and continuous improvement as its core mission (Halling & Renstrom, 2015). Similarly, Yozan applied these principles to improve the quality of life for his people and enhance the region. By embracing ikigai, he inspired individuals to work in areas they were passionate about and skilled in, driving ongoing regional progress (Asakawa, 1911). Yozan fostered respect through compassionate leadership and Zen values, promoting continuous improvement with initiatives like education support and disaster relief (Asakawa, 1911).

6. Insights and implications for today's leaders

The analysis highlighted the key role of compassion, Zen philosophy and ikigai in shaping Yozan's leadership style. These three elements were identified as distinctive and consistently featured in the literature. By incorporating Zen, ikigai and lean principles, Yozan's leadership has the potential to transform organizations through a combination of mindfulness, purpose and efficiency. When applied across various sectors and organizational levels, these philosophies help leaders create environments that are not only productive but also meaningful and sustainable (Barnes *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, they support organizations in fostering a balanced, efficient and purpose-driven culture at all levels.

The findings also align with TMC, where Zen and Lean leadership principles are applied to improve quality and efficiency through the Toyota Production System (TPS), although ikigai is not explicitly incorporated. TMC's use of Zen and Lean focuses on respecting people and promoting continuous improvement (Halling & Renstrom, 2015). TMC cultivates a culture of respect and development, empowering employees to solve problems while using value stream mapping to identify inefficiencies. By standardizing procedures, leaders reduce inventory and waste, ultimately driving engagement, innovation and operational excellence through their respect for employees' contributions to problem-solving (Jayamaha *et al.*, 2014; James, 2021).

Yozan's leadership fostered a sustainable economy by empowering individuals. His approach, which blended Lean, Zen and ikigai, offered benefits such as Lean's focus on continuous improvement, efficiency and value creation while minimizing waste. Zen promoted well-being and mindfulness (Yoneyama, 2007) and ikigai provided personal purpose (Mitsuhashi, 2018). Yozan encouraged problem-solving, collaboration and process optimization, while emphasizing respect, standardization and continuous learning. However, further research is needed to address notable gaps in the industry using this method such as resistance to cultural change, misalignment with organizational goals and balancing efficiency with satisfaction. Additionally, scaling these factors, managing training and aligning expectations require further exploration.

Yozan's leadership style shares similarities with several other approaches that promote commitment, collaboration and empowerment, including Modern, Servant and Purpose-driven leadership, all of which also encounter implementation challenges, as outlined in Table 2.

Yozan's leadership style aligns with other approaches like Modern, Servant and Purpose-driven leadership, all of which emphasize commitment, collaboration and empowerment. However, Yozan's approach uniquely incorporates Zen and ikigai alongside compassion. Under his leadership, individuals from all backgrounds were empowered, promoting personal growth and improving lives. His style fostered an efficient, fulfilling workplace where employees felt respected, purposeful and motivated, driving sustainable success and contributing to overall well-being (Suzuki, 2016). The individuals empowered by Yozan played a pivotal role in bolstering Yonezawa's economy. His emotional awareness and self-mastery helped others feel more confident in themselves and more satisfied with their lives (Imran *et al.*, 2024). Yozan, esteemed by those he served, was regarded as an admirable and benevolent leader (Asakawa, 1911). Rather than adopting an authoritarian approach common in the Western world today, he demonstrated his higher purpose or ikigai, by prioritizing the welfare of Yonezawa's people in his governance (Ravina, 2013).

Table 2. Compares Yozan's leadership style with other similar styles

Leadership styles	Leadership challenges	Tackling Challenges
Modern leadership relies on active collaboration between leaders and followers, creating mutually influential relationships to reach shared goals. Both leaders and followers take personal responsibility for achieving these objectives (Yussup, 2022).	Modern leadership challenges require leaders to have skills in goal-setting, team guidance and influence, while managing burnout, competing priorities and making complex decisions with input from followers (Yussup, 2022).	Yozan's style would address this by emphasizing compassion and efficiency, while empowering individuals through adaptability, innovation and personal growth (Kotera <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Servant leadership focuses on empowering and serving others, prioritizing the needs of team members while fostering a culture of collaboration and trust (Greenleaf, 2014).	Servant leadership challenges involve fostering follower development through empathy and ethics, but can lead to slow decision-making, authority conflicts and burnout (Kotera <i>et al.</i> , 2024).	Yozan's style blends compassion, purpose and continuous improvement, including mindfulness, to enhance his people's well-being (Suzuki, 2016).
Purpose-driven leaders are selected for their commitment to the organization's mission, focusing on discovering and aligning personal and organizational goals (Hong <i>et al.</i> , 2021).	Purpose-driven leadership can encounter challenges, especially during uncertain times, such as misalignment, resistance to change and a loss of focus on the mission or vision, which can diminish its effectiveness (Hong <i>et al.</i> , 2021).	Yozan's style inspired commitment by combining compassionate leadership, clear purpose, efficiency, continuous improvement and a strong focus on the well-being of others (Suzuki, 2016).

Yozan's leadership, grounded in compassion and empathy, likely served as an inspiration to his people, instilling in them a collective sense of purpose and potentially fostering their individual senses of *ikigai* (Wilkes *et al.*, 2022). Having a sense of *ikigai* is associated with positive psychological benefits (Fido *et al.*, 2019) and can improve job satisfaction (Misuhashi, 2018). Like Yozan, leaders in the Western world should seek to cultivate *ikigai* and Zen, which would benefit individuals and boost work productivity (Gadaria & Bhatt, 2024). Many companies, including TMC and global motor manufacturer Nidec, have seen significant growth in the past decade by adopting Lean leadership. Their approach is associated with Zen values, incorporating knowledge-creation initiatives for staff based on core values, expectations and procedures (Kosaka & Nie, 2020). However, *ikigai* is not explicitly referenced in Toyota's management practices.

Japanese Zen philosophy emphasizes communal engagement as a core ideal, focusing on nurturing personal relationships that align with individual values and aspirations (McCann, 2019). This practice allows leaders to maintain inner balance while gaining a deeper understanding of others' unique talents, enabling them to make logical decisions and guide individuals toward shared goals (McCann, 2019).

Yozan considered himself a servant of the people and made decisions to serve people based on building the estate (Ravina, 1988). He also made decisions that empowered people to uniquely contribute and successfully bring the estate out of debt (Chard, 2019). Yozan's leadership approach was embraced by 20th-century corporations that utilized similar leadership methods, including notable examples like TMC and Nidec (<https://www.nidec.com/en/corporate/about/>). For instance, Nidec Corporation has experienced significant growth by empowering and developing its staff, while recruiting

leaders who prioritize their people and foster collaborative, harmonious and supportive environments (Kosaka & Nie, 2020).

In Zen tradition, practical experience is considered more valuable than academic knowledge (Nagatomo, 2019). This belief enables leaders to build better relationships with greater understanding which helps foster trust and helps employees work more effectively (Nagatomo, 2019). Zen practice also promotes compassion and working towards “perfect personhood” by implementing non-discriminatory wisdom in everyday life. This includes interactions with oneself, others and the environment (Nagatomo, 2019).

Zen philosophy also benefits leaders by helping them to better understand their people and aids them in making decisions not solely based on feedback from multiple people and sources (Domon, 1992). TMC utilizes a comparable strategy to improve engagement, productivity and co-creation (Table 3) (Chiarinim *et al.*, 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that the link between Toyota's practices and Zen philosophy is interpretive, based on thematic similarities rather than empirical proof.

Further research, such as interviews with Toyota employees, is needed to confirm this connection more comprehensively. The 'Toyota Way' approach, grounded in respect and continuous improvement, aims to establish a consistent organisational culture across all global functions (Jayamaha *et al.*, 2014). By incorporating these principles and Zen teachings, leaders can tap into employees' knowledge and skills, unlocking human potential and driving positive outcomes (Yoneyama, 2007). This approach also empowers employees to effectively tackle challenges, leading to enhanced results and the underlying philosophy remains relevant for today's organisations and their workforce (Kotera, 2021).

Table 3. Leadership of Yozan and TMC through compassion, ikigai and Zen lenses

	Yozan	Toyota
Compassion	Implementing the “Three Help Spirits” welfare system fostered a more compassionate and sustainable framework through social support, economic assistance and emotional well-being (Fukumoto, 2019).	At TMC, respect for humanity promotes compassion and dignity for all stakeholders, fostering mutual support through teamwork and collaboration. This ethos fuels collective success as teams unite to achieve shared objectives in a nurturing environment driven by a shared purpose (Larue, 2023).
Ikigai	Offering meaningful jobs to all members of Yonezawa and living a frugal life to demonstrate an example (Aoki & Dardes, 1976).	TMC does not explicitly reference ikigai in their management practices, though one could interpret their approach as aligning with the concept of “ikigai” - finding purpose in one's actions. Through initiatives such as education support and disaster relief, TMC contributes to both corporate responsibilities and personal fulfillment (Larue, 2023).
Zen	Yozan was regarded as a servant of the people, making decisions that prioritized their well-being while strengthening the estate. His leadership focused on respect and empowering individuals to contribute in their own ways, which played a key role in the estate's successful recovery from economic debt (Ravina, 1998).	TMC's leadership, rooted in Lean principles, focuses on continuous improvement, respect and community involvement (Stanton <i>et al.</i> , 2014). This approach reflects Zen values, encouraging self-reliance, mutual support and harmony. The “Three Help Spirits” system enhances compassion and sustainability by providing social, economic and emotional support (Fukumoto, 2019).

Figure 1 illustrates Yozan Uesugi's leadership journey upon taking charge of a struggling regional government facing high living costs, economic debt and instability. It highlights his leadership style, which mirrors lean principles through respect and a commitment to improvement, characterized by compassion, Zen teachings and alignment with 'ikigai'.

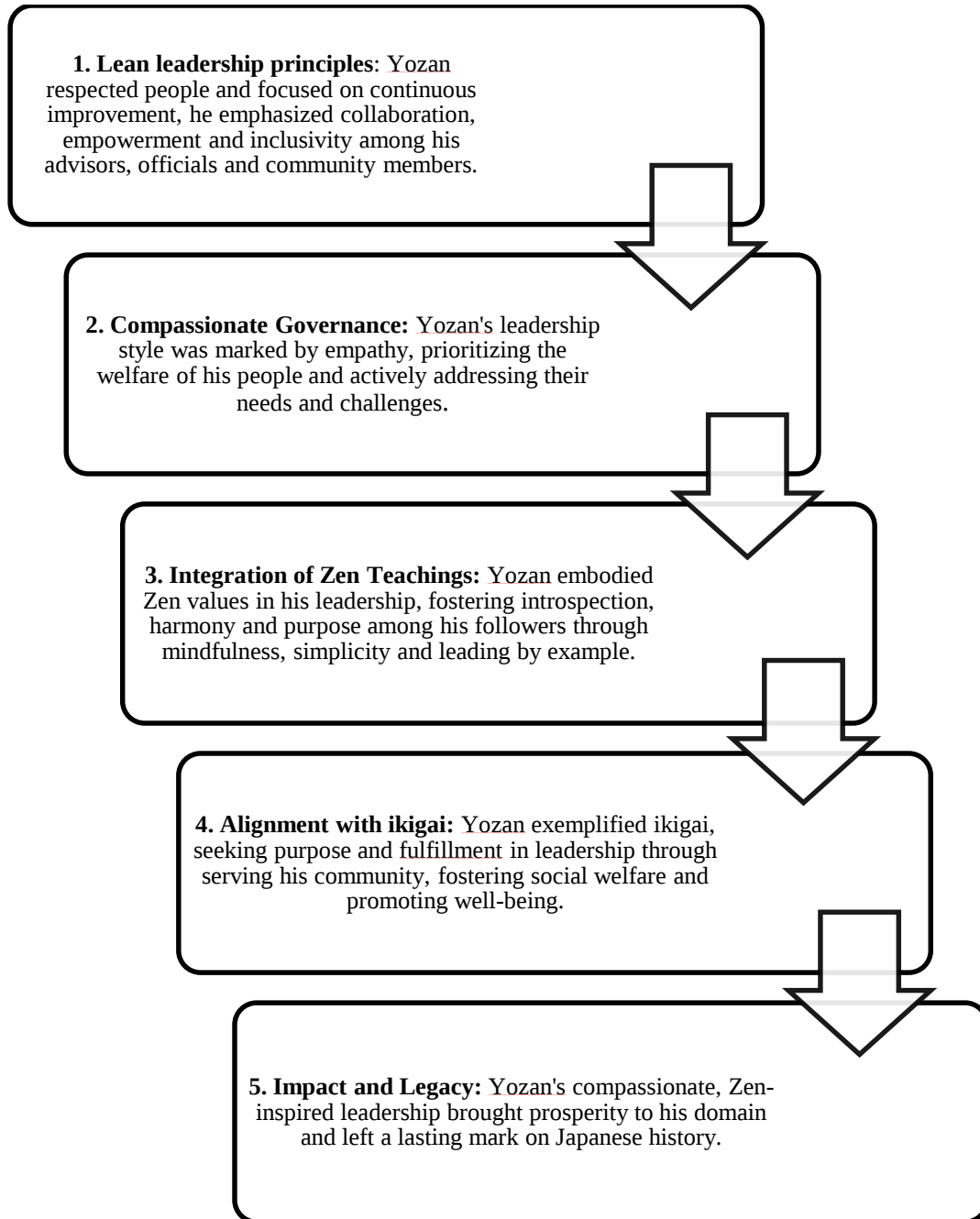


Figure 1. Depicts Yozan's governance journey, characterized by lean principles, compassion, Zen teachings and alignment with 'ikigai' (authors)

While this paper highlights Yozan Uesugi's leadership effectiveness, it also acknowledges the importance of contextual factors. The contingency theory of leadership

(Fiedler, 1971) emphasises that effective leadership depends on situational variables, such as organisational structure, cultural values and historical context. Yozan's success as a leader emerged in the specific context of 18th-century Yonezawa, Japan, where social, economic and cultural factors aligned with his approach. We caution against generalizing Yozan's leadership principles to vastly different contexts, such as modern corporate organisations or 21st-century global economies, without careful adaptation. However, the core values underlying his leadership - compassion, efficiency and purpose - can serve as guiding principles. Future research should explore how these principles might be adjusted to fit contemporary challenges and diverse cultural settings, recognizing the evolving nature of leadership.

7. Conclusion

Yozan was an authentic and compassionate leader who set himself apart from modern Western business and government figures. He focused on the well-being and prosperity of his people, striving to improve their quality of life. In contrast, many current Western leaders, confronted with comparable economic challenges, rising debt and escalating living costs, tend to prioritize power and control over the needs and welfare of individuals. These leaders often lack empathy and integrity (Chapman, 2020).

Yozan's leadership style, grounded in respect for individuals and continuous improvement, fostered a thriving, sustainable economy free from debt and with low living costs. His approach fostered a culture of respect and built a successful economy by empowering individuals to solve problems, enhancing engagement and innovation in line with lean principles (Stanton *et al.*, 2014). Yozan, focused on people while fostering a culture of continuous improvement, empowering individuals to lead change, a key feature of lean leadership (Halling & Renstrom, 2015). His approach has influenced political leaders and businesses globally, including Caroline Kennedy (Kozawa, 2010) and Nidec Corporation (Kosaka & Nie, 2020). While a comprehensive psychological review of these leadership aspects is not included, this paper examines Yozan's leadership through Lean principles, compassion, Zen philosophies and *ikigai*, emphasizing its relevance for contemporary leaders, particularly in the Western world.

The paper also developed a framework based on Yozan's governance leadership journey, marked by lean principles, compassion, Zen teachings and alignment with '*ikigai*' (authors). This bottom-up management approach leverages workers' knowledge and expertise, unlocking inherent human potential and driving positive results (Yoneyama, 2007). This conceptual paper aims to assist contemporary leaders in incorporating lean principles, compassion, Zen philosophy and *ikigai* into their leadership practices to achieve these benefits. By implementing these strategies, organisations can foster a healthy environment that emphasizes employee well-being while enhancing productivity and engagement. To effectively integrate lean leadership, Zen and *ikigai*, several key conditions are needed:

1. Continuous Improvement: Focusing on continuous improvement and mindfulness.
2. Empowerment: Leaders empower individuals to decide and take ownership.
3. Respect for People: Fostering a culture of empathy, collaboration and mutual respect.
4. Mindfulness: Encouraging focus and clarity in decision-making.

5. Well-being and Growth: Supporting both personal fulfillment and professional development.

6. Clear Purpose: Aligning individual goals with the company's mission.

7. Balance: Promoting work-life harmony and sustainability.

8. Long-term Vision: Focusing on sustainable practices and goals.

By fostering these conditions, organisations can combine lean leadership with Zen and ikigai to drive efficiency, well-being and purpose-driven growth.

This paper has limitations due to its conceptual focus, with much leadership literature rooted in the Western world, often overlooking Eastern perspectives. It calls for further research on lean leadership, Zen philosophy and ikigai, which originate outside the West. Nevertheless, it is evident that managerial implications require openness to change and offering teams the communication and support needed to navigate transitions, no matter the location. Since an organisation's culture is distinctive and not easily transformed, it necessitates strong leadership and management skills. All stakeholders should embrace lean principles, emphasize respect and encourage continuous improvement. Incorporating Zen practices such as mindfulness and balance, alongside aligning with ikigai to clarify purpose, plays a vital role in fostering collaboration and inspiring innovation.

Future managers and leaders must create strategies that resonate with today's people, leading with authenticity and compassion and prioritizing the well-being and prosperity of their teams to enhance their quality of life. While acknowledging its limitations, this paper introduces these concepts and a governance framework to serve as a foundation for future research and development.

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