Adage in Action Examples of Change Focus

Introduction

I found a great quote while reading Patrick Moore's new eBook, *How to Develop an Addiction or Not* (https://www.prehabmapp.com/). On page 33, I came across this line:

> "*If you focus on results, you will never change; if you focus on change, you will get results*." — Jack Dixon

This quote captures a quiet but profound truth about human change: attention shapes experience, and experience shapes behavior. When people orient their attention toward distant outcomes – symptom elimination, sobriety milestones, emotional states they believe they should have by now – they unintentionally step out of the very conditions required for transformation. ***Change does not occur in the future result, it occurs in the present process***. And nowhere is this distinction clearer than in the difference between outcome-focused therapeutic models and process-oriented flow states.

Traditional therapeutic and recovery approaches often emphasize deficits, symptoms, and endpoints: *What's wrong? How severe is it? How far are we from where we should be?* While diagnostically useful, this orientation trains attention toward results not yet achieved. The mind becomes preoccupied with distance – from health, from sobriety, from "normal." That preoccupation easily generates what might be called negative flow: a self-reinforcing loop of rumination, self-monitoring, comparison, and impatience. Attention narrows around what isn't yet working, amplifying frustration, shame, and perceived failure – precisely the internal conditions that undermine change.

Flow states, by contrast, arise when attention is absorbed in engaged, effortful, appropriately challenging action, not in evaluating progress toward a future goal. In recovery and change work, *this means shifting focus from fixing pathology to participating in improvement*. When people track small wins, practice skills, regulate their nervous system, interrupt rituals, or rewrite narratives in real time, attention moves into the present-moment mechanics of change.

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Flow states were first described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (as summarized by Sutton, 2025) to explain moments of deep engagement in which a person becomes fully absorbed in a meaningful activity. In "flow", attention narrows onto the task at hand; self-conscious rumination quiets; effort feels purposeful rather than draining; and feedback is immediate enough to guide adjustment without constant self-evaluation. Time may feel altered, but agency remains intact.

Importantly, flow is not relaxation, distraction, dissociation, or escape. *It is an active, regulated state in which challenge and skill are well matched, allowing learning and competence to grow*. In therapeutic and recovery contexts, flow functions less as a goal to be chased and more as a *signal* that attention has moved into the conditions where change can occur. Flow describes the internal experience of engaged change, when attention is no longer consumed by judging progress, but is instead invested in the present-moment mechanics of improvement.

This produces beneficial (positive) flow: momentum, competence, agency, and intrinsic reward. Ironically, the very outcomes people want – symptom reduction, stability, meaning, sobriety (or moderation) – emerge as natural byproducts of this present-tense process-focus.

Jack Dixon's insight holds because results are consequences, not levers. You cannot pull on outcomes directly. You can only engage in the behaviors, practices, and perceptual shifts that make those outcomes possible over time. Flow is what change feels like from the inside when attention is placed where it belongs – not on what's missing, but on what's being built. And when attention is held there long enough, results arrive quietly, almost as an afterthought.

Even more interesting is the fact that we're not always the first to recognize these subtle changes. I lost count of the times in my early years of recovery when others commented on ways I was different – *better* – changes I hadn't yet noticed or fully recognized myself. It took time to integrate those realizations and to accept myself, as it were, *in my new skin*.

There's a familiar saying about people not being "comfortable in their own skin," and it applies in a very real way to recovery. Change often outpaces identity. It's common for people who have lived in chaos, conflict, or emotional volatility to feel unsettled when things begin to quiet – in their minds, their bodies, and their spirits. Calm can feel unfamiliar, even disorienting. Learning how to *be* with that steadiness is itself a phase of change, not a sign that something is wrong.

Moving now to tangible examples of focusing on change; below are examples of how a focus on present change action is more powerful that focusing on a future goal or result. I've created 10 generic examples (using New Year's resolutions), followed by 10 examples related to addiction and recovery. These are all examples of Dixon's 'Adage in Action'.

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Generic 'Adage in Action' Examples of Change Focus

Below are examples of common New Year's resolution traps (results-focus), reframed into sustainable, habits-first, change-focus commitments.

1. **For Health & Fitness**

   Result-focus: "I want to run a marathon this year."
   Change-focus: "I'm going to run for 10 minutes today."
   Powerful Pivot: Small, consistent training creates a runner. The marathon is simply something runners eventually do.

2. **For Mental Health**

   Result-focus: "I want to feel less anxious."
   Change-focus: "I'll practice 5 minutes of breathing or grounding today."
   Powerful Pivot: Emotional regulation is built in micro-practices, not in demanding a different emotional state.

3. **For Professional Growth**

   Result-focus: "I want a promotion."
   Change-focus: "I'll complete one high-impact task today and proactively communicate progress."
   Powerful Pivot: Careers rise through small daily contributions, not by chasing titles.

4. **For Financial Discipline**

   Result-focus: "I want to save $10,000 this year."
   Change-focus: "I'll automate $20 a week into savings."
   Powerful Pivot: Wealth is a byproduct of habits and systems, not wishes.

5. **For Learning New Skills**

   Result-focus: "I want to learn Spanish."
   Change-focus: "I'll spend 10 minutes today learning five new words."
   Powerful Pivot: Fluency is the natural result of repetition, not ambition.

6. **For Relationship Improvement**

   Result-focus: "I want a better marriage."
   Change-focus: "Today I'll express appreciation, listen fully, and put my phone away."
   Powerful Pivot: Strong relationships grow through daily deposits, not grand expectations.

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7. **For Creativity**

   Result-focus: "I want to write a book."
   Change-focus: "I'll write for 15 minutes today."
   Powerful Pivot: Writers don't write books, they write paragraphs and pages that eventually become books.

8. **For Stress & Overwhelm**

   Result-focus: "I want a more peaceful life."
   Change-focus: "I'll clear one small cluttered space or say no to one unnecessary task today."
   Powerful Pivot: Peace is crafted in choices that reduce friction and noise.

9. **For Recovery & Habit Change (your wheelhouse)**

   Result-focus: "I want to stop acting out / stop drinking / stop bingeing."
   Change-focus: "Today I'll disrupt one trigger, pause before reacting, and choose one healthier coping action."
   Powerful Pivot: Recovery is identity reconstruction; abstinence is a downstream result of upstream changes.

10. **For Purpose & Meaning**

    Result-focus: "I want to find my purpose."
    Change-focus: "I'll do one thing today that aligns with curiosity, compassion, or contribution."
    Powerful Pivot: Purpose emerges from lived values, not from intellectual searching.

Recovery-oriented 'Adage in Action' Examples of Change Focus

Below are recovery-specific versions of Jack Dixon's adage, written cleanly, compassionately, and fully aligned with my Addiction is a Habit, Trigger–Ritual–Relief, and identity-level change (OSCAR) frameworks. Each example contrasts the results-focus that trips people up with the change-focus that actually builds recovery capacity.

1. **Abstinence vs. Agency Building**

   Result-focus: "I'm going to stop drinking/using/acting out forever."
   Change-focus: "Today, I'll interrupt one trigger and choose one different coping action."
   Powerful Pivot: Sustainable abstinence is downstream of strengthened agency, not willpower declarations.

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2. **White-Knuckling vs. Nervous System Regulation**

   Result-focus: "I just need to resist harder."
   Change-focus: "When I feel activated, I'll breathe, ground, or regulate before deciding anything."
   Powerful Pivot: You can't out-think dysregulation; you must out-regulate it.

3. **Instant Identity Shift vs. Narrative Rewriting**

   Result-focus: "I want to stop being 'that person.'"
   Change-focus: "Today I'll speak to myself differently and practice the story I'm becoming."
   Powerful Pivot: Identity shifts through repeated self-narratives, not through self-loathing.

4. **Perfect Sobriety vs. Pattern Awareness**

   Result-focus: "I can't ever slip again."
   Change-focus: "I'll track my patterns, rituals, and rituals' precursors."
   Powerful Pivot: You can't fix what you won't map.

5. **Shame Reduction vs. Micro-Honesty**

   Result-focus: "I want to stop feeling ashamed."
   Change-focus: "I'll be honest in one small place today – with myself or someone safe."
   Powerful Pivot: Shame dissolves in the presence of truth spoken in manageable doses.

6. **Big Recovery Goals vs. Capacity Stacking**

   Result-focus: "I want a totally transformed life."
   Change-focus: "I'll complete one recovery behavior today: meeting, call, journal, or pause."
   Powerful Pivot: Recovery grows the same way muscles do, through progressive overload, not heroic leaps.

7. **Relationship Repair vs. Daily Repair Attempts**

   Result-focus: "I need to fix my marriage/family right away."
   Change-focus: "Today, I'll make one amends in action: presence, accountability, or service."
   Powerful Pivot: Trust returns through slow deposits, not sweeping promises.

8. **Emotional Stability vs. Emotional Tolerance**

   Result-focus: "I want to stop feeling cravings, sadness, anxiety, or loneliness."
   Change-focus: "Today, I'll tolerate one discomfort without numbing it."
   Powerful Pivot: Recovery expands your window of tolerance, not your comfort zone.

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9. **Long-term Sobriety vs. Short-term Ritual Disruption**

   Result-focus: "I want 30/90/365 days."
   Change-focus: "I'll disrupt the ritual that follows my trigger by changing location, calling someone, or interrupting the sequence."
   Powerful Pivot: Every broken ritual is a rep in the gym of neuroplastic change.

10. **Life Transformation vs. Daily Stewardship**

    Result-focus: "I want the life I lost back."
    Change-focus: "Today, I'll steward my body, time, relationships, and values with one concrete action."
    Powerful Pivot: You don't rebuild life through longing; you rebuild it through stewardship.

Conclusion

Jack Dixon's adage endures because it names a mistake so many of us repeat, year after year: we aim our attention at outcomes and then wonder why change doesn't follow. Results feel motivating in theory, but in practice they pull attention out of the present flow and into comparison, impatience, and self-judgment. Change, by contrast, only ever happens in the moment – through actions taken, habits practiced, narratives adjusted, and capacities slowly strengthened.

The distinction between results-focus and change-focus is not philosophical, it is functional. Results-focus asks *Where should I be by now?* Change-focus asks *What can I practice today?* Results-focus breeds pressure and negative flow. Change-focus creates the conditions for positive flow – engaged attention, growing competence, restored agency, and intrinsic reward. And as the examples throughout this article illustrate, when attention is held long enough, results tend to arrive on their own.

As another New Year approaches, the invitation is not to set better resolutions, but to set *different kinds of commitments*. Instead of promising yourself an outcome – sobriety milestones, emotional states, weight targets, or total life transformation – commit to one small, repeatable change you can enact today. One habit. One interruption. One regulated pause. One honest conversation. One act of stewardship.

If 2025 taught us anything, it's that willpower declarations don't create change, daily participation in flow does. Begin 2026 not by demanding a different future, but by engaging a different present. Focus on change, and let the results take care of themselves.

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References

Sutton, J. (2025, October 9). *Mihály Csíkszentmihályi: The Father of Flow*. PositivePsychology.com. https://positivepsychology.com/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi-father-of-flow/

LLM Disclaimer

Note: large language models were used to validate facts, and to expand and challenge ideas, but not in the creation of the content itself. All Oxford commas, camel cases, and en/em dashes are proudly mine and suggest I may be the OG LLM.